



A FOUR SQUARE BOOK

376

THE SEDUCTION SUSAN YORKE

"WE ALL LIVE SEDUCED OR SEDUCING" ST. AUGUSTINE

THE SEDUCTION

"A wonderful presentation of *kampong* life as well as of the muddled inter-racial jealousies and hatreds of Malaya." - *Sunday Times*.

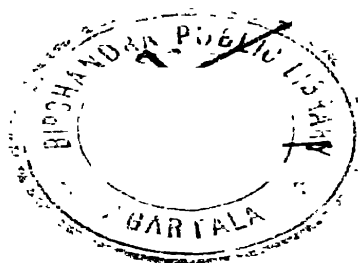
"A deeply perceptive story." *Birmingham Mail*.

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"Sensitive and intelligent." - *The Guardian*.

The Seduction

SUSAN YORKE



A FOUR SQUARE BOOK

This is a work of fiction. The characters and events described are wholly the product of the author's imagination, and no intentional reference has been made to persons living or dead.

A Glossary of Malayan terms is given on p. 189

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ONE

My name is Zainah.

From where I am now sitting, I can see downhill and along the Government road to the kampong where I have lived most of my life. I can also see the aluminium roof of my house glinting in the sun and I know my younger sister will be watering the potted plants at this hour, and the orchids in hanging baskets around the veranda the way I have so often done.

There are all kinds of kampongs, just as there are all kinds of people. Some are small and shabby, some poor, some rich and some – like mine – spacious and well-to-do without being wealthy. There are twenty-three houses in the kampong of which mine is the finest (although the Imam's is larger) with its flight of Malacca-tiled stairs leading from the ground to the veranda, a bamboo table and chairs where we take our makan, and a bamboo settee and armchairs in the lounge. There are pink, ruffled cotton curtains at the windows which are replaced whenever they fade. Pink was my mother's favourite colour, and my father still insists on pink curtains although she has been dead many years. We have a battery radio that plays softly all day long, but no car. We hire a taxi if we want to drive anywhere, which isn't often. The woodwork of the house is prettily carved with care, and the stilts of the house are embedded in cement so that no termites can secretly eat us.

Like the other householders, we have a plot of coffee bushes and an orange grove and five acres of mature rubber which my sisters tap, and banana and papaya trees by the kitchen shed. I have never in my life been cold or hungry or abandoned or physically maltreated. I have always been occupied, not frantically busy in fits and starts the way the Europeans are who live on Tanah Hijau, the

big London-owned rubber estate in our district, or scurryingly industrious the way the Chinese are in their raucous little village, just puttering, contentedly occupied. We are a family of women, for my father's second wife also died after her fourth daughter was born and he never married again. There is always laundry and ironing and cooking and sweeping and sewing going on around the house, and, when I was younger, the care of my sisters; there is unending looking after the property, bathing in the stream behind the kampong and tending the plants. My father, who is the leading man or penghulu of our community, claims you can always tell the state of a kampong by the condition of its plants.

I am writing now, as my father and the Imam have instructed me to, at a table in the jailroom of the new local police station. I am to write everything relevant to the murder and then the Kuala Lumpur lawyer who has been hired to save me will go over it carefully and decide what should be suppressed and what emphasized. The Imam has particularly counselled me to stress the word 'seducer' in connection with the event, as this is a powerful word in the European mind and has connotations favourable to my case, but then, of course, neither my father nor the Imam will know the truth about the matter until they read what I am writing.

If the case is tried in our local court, things will be very easy for me. I know the court bungalow well; it has a large, square room with many doors always standing open on to the veranda, rows of backless wooden benches, a waist-high box where I shall stand in the centre of the room, a chair from which I will give testimony, and the judge is an old childhood friend of my father's who has known me since I was born.

In the same way, this police station is thoroughly familiar to me. When it was built last year it was I who supplied the potted plants that now surround it. It is a low, one-storey building of concrete and brick which is unexpectedly cool because of the shade from the frangi-pani

trees which surround it. It is painted pale blue with a pink trim, and the halved kerosene tins in which the plants are growing are also pale blue with MERDEKA stencilled on them in neat black letters.

Usually the jailroom is empty. If I were not in jail I would not run away, for there is nowhere for me to run and furthermore I have no desire to run, but it is a part of the due process of law that I be detained because of what I've said I've done and anyway the law must have somebody to blame for it all. I am not at all inconvenienced, it is clean and comfortable and quiet and I can think calmly. My father and the Imam have brought me food, although I am not hungry. I have been here only two days.

I have seen pictures in magazines and in the cinema of London and Paris and New York jails, grim buildings indeed, and those are jails I should not care for.

My childhood and education has been no different from that of other kampong Malay girls, and no doubt I would have grown up exactly like them if the manager's Mem on Tanah Hijau hadn't brought me daily to the bungalow when I was twelve years old. That changed my life.

Those were the days when the emergency was in full force, the Chinese village had a double fence of barbed wire around it and floodlights, as did the bungalows on the rubber estate and our own kampong. There was a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew and the European planters went around armed with carbines in armour-plated Land-Rovers or Ford V-8's and with an escort of armed Special Constabulary. I was too young to appreciate the menace of the bandits, as the Communist terrorists were called, and it was only years later when the curfew was lifted, food-rationing abandoned, the floodlights no longer lit and the barbed wire allowed to sag unrepaired that I realized how unnatural our life had been.

Every morning the Mem sent the armoured Ford for me, and every evening I was returned to the kampong in it. The distance between my house and the manager's bungalow is a little over two miles. Before she returned to

Glasgow, as the wives of all managers seem to do sooner or later, she had taught me English so thoroughly that I was bi-lingual, and English customs and cooking. I often wonder why, of all the Malay girls in our kampong, she selected me as the one to be educated. I never had the courage to ask her. Perhaps it was simply because she liked my looks, or my smile; perhaps she was lonely and wanted company and took the first child she saw and taught it for her own amusement. There's no diversion on the estate and the Mem was pretty much a prisoner confined to the bungalow during the emergency years. I wish I could say I am grateful to her for the education she gave me, but I am not entirely sure that I am. For one thing, had I not spoken English, or known European habits, not been *me*, the murder would never have had a chance to occur.

When the manager's Mem left, the manager took a keep, as is quite common, and he sent for me only when he had guests. His keep is called Ah Fan, and he says she's 'so bloody ugly she puts the guests off their drink' so I have served the drinks and hot salted nuts and egg canapés at his parties ever since then, up until last week to be accurate, while Ah Fan cooks a nasi goreng, a fried rice dish, in the cookshed which everybody is always too drunk to eat anyway.

The rubber estate, like the kampong and the Chinese village up the road, has always been part of my life. Now and then some of our kampong boys take jobs on the estate, tapping trees, when extra work is needed, and I have frequently cooked matay not only for the manager's parties but also for Mem Helena and her husband who live in the smaller assistant's bungalow with their two children on top of the highest hill in this district, which isn't very high as we're too close to the sea to have even the foothills of our central mountain-range.

The rubber estate is large, one of the big ones of the country, and therefore important, but it is not a happy place. My father says it was different before the Japanese

occupation, but since those days – when the manager's bungalow was Japanese headquarters and the club, burned to the ground years ago, the torture-house – things on the estate have always been uneasy, as if a curse had been pronounced over it.

Mem Helena is the only European woman who has lived on the estate since the manager's Mem left. There are several assistants, they vary in number according to what's available and the manager's tantrums, and except for Mem Helena's husband, Tuan Ian, they have always been bachelors. They change, sometimes after a year, sometimes in a few months. As there is nothing for them to do after work, and nowhere to go, no sports facilities or cinemas, they generally get into trouble. My father says this is another point it would be wise for me to dwell on.

After what happened two days ago I didn't expect to see Mem Helena ever again, but she came this morning to see me, bringing me a bunch of mangosteens from the market, which she knows I love. I was so touched that almost, *almost*, I began to feel again. She looked at me with those great green eyes of hers and I longed to tell her all about it. Since she is no fool, I am certain she guesses a good deal, but I know she blames me and is quite unaware that my father and the Imam are in it, too, right up to the eyes. She looked tired and dispirited and terribly sad, only her beautiful honey hair was as alive as always and we didn't speak much.

'Don't you *feel* anything about all this, Zainah?' she asked in her cool, low voice. 'Don't you *feel*?'

'I feel like one of those ice-cubes you used to plop into my orangeade when I was posing for you,' I said, and that was true. I prefer to go on feeling that way as I'm afraid anything else would be unbearable.

'Poor child,' Mem Helena said, although she is only five years older than I. I am twenty-four. For an unmarried girl, that's old.

Mem Helena looked at me without saying anything for several minutes and then, leaning towards me, she said, in

a speculative tone, as if she were speaking of something with which we weren't both thoroughly involved,

'Isn't it strange?' she asked. 'Because I loved David, a new life was brought into the world, and because you loved him, a life went out. I am beginning to believe in the old Jewish law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

'I didn't know you knew about me, about my feelings,' I said, but that wasn't strictly true, for I suspected Mem Helena had discovered my secret the evening David brought me back to her bungalow after the tennis-court episode.

Mem Helena looked at me oddly and then said slowly, 'I didn't know until just recently, until the tennis-court night.' She sighed and shook her head. 'It seems ages ago.' Then she looked hard at me and said crisply, 'Zainah, why in God's name didn't you prevent it? I know you didn't do it, but you could have stopped it.'

'I tried,' I told her, but I saw disbelief sit heavily in her eyes. 'I was too late.'

She rose at that still not believing me although I had spoken the truth. 'Zainah,' she said slowly, 'they want an epitaph for his grave. What should it be?'

I didn't have to reflect over that.

'Ishmael,' I answered, and her eyes widened with surprise and then with comprehension.

'Yes,' she agreed, nodding and looking at me closely, 'that's good.' Her gaze shifted and she looked beyond me, not seeing what was there, but remembering, reflecting. 'I didn't realize ...' she began and trailed off. 'There's so much we didn't realize,' she amended.

There wasn't more to say and she left me after that.

Mem Helena paints a diversity of pictures on very large canvases. Ever since she first came to the estate, she has used me as a model. She saw me one day from her car, I was watering the plants at home, and she stopped and called on me and was surprised that I spoke English so well. I had no idea what posing meant, but it sounded like

something new and interesting and I was paid a stipulated sum per hour, not very much, but I was earning money and that delighted me. My father was pleased that Mem Helena found me beautiful. He told her I resembled my mother, I was his favourite daughter. The next day I went to Mem Helena's hill-top bungalow where – eventually – we both met David.

But before David, Mem Helena and I had several happy years together. Not that the David-years were unhappy at first, but in the end they became a grievous time. She had just had a baby and I started looking after it, I was so used to children it seemed the natural thing to do, and when she had her second child, David's child, I looked after her. I have always admired everything about Mem Helena, her husband, her children, her home, her two funny, small black dachels and her lover, too.

Mem Helena is Dutch and comes from Java – she hates the damp greyness of Holland – where her people, and their people back for generations, were planters, so we sometimes spoke in Malay which she insists she speaks better than Dutch. After David came, we always conversed in English; his Malay was of the bazaar variety, mine was mainly kampong Malay and Mem Helena spoke rajah Malay, so we were really speaking three different languages. We had English in common.

Her parents died in a Japanese camp, but she survived and was finally sent to Singapore, to be sent back to Holland where she knew nobody and didn't want to go. She's spoken to me about that period of her life. She said she dreaded the cold and the dreariness, the snow and the rain, and I sympathized with her. I, too, wouldn't care to go to such a climate after the pleasantness of our native climate, the cool mornings and evenings, the clear refreshing nights and the hot afternoons when we bathe in the river. Mem Helena met Tuan Ian in Singapore, and instead of going to Holland she married him and remained in the type of surroundings she knows so well. Tuan Ian adores her, as, I think, any man must.

At first we had trouble with my posing. I couldn't hold still long enough, or I unwittingly changed my position and threw her perspective out, so she showed me coloured pictures of paintings and explained to me what she was trying to do. She admitted what had drawn her eye to me that first day was not so much my face and figure – as my father so fondly thought – but the colours I was wearing. I had on a flowered magenta sarong, I remember, and a transparent mauve kebaya, tucked tightly at the waist, and a filmy pale green scarf over my head and shoulders.

I loved the hues and tints in many of the pictures she showed me. Perhaps this is why I love plants so much, especially the flowering ones; their wild colours excite me and I try to imitate their magnificence in my dress. One day I asked Mem Helena where all the pictures were that she showed me in her books and folders and she said they were housed in museums around the world, very much like the collection of local pictures in the Kuala Lumpur museum, except the other museums were larger and the paintings more valuable. I asked her how much such paintings cost and she showed me a picture of a woman's face done by a Flemish artist centuries ago and told me that that one painting could buy my entire kampong ten, perhaps twenty times over. I asked her if that was why she painted, to make a vast sum of money, but she assured me that paintings usually become valuable only after the artist was dead, or extremely old.

She showed me some twisted, twirled landscapes of a compatriot of hers who had lived and died in poverty and whose paintings today often fetch the highest price at art auctions. She explained it by saying that the public taste changes, but I remember when we once discussed this with David he said that was nonsense, that what happened was the deliberate creation of an artificial market to make the prices of certain paintings or schools or artists shoot upward and as a result most collectors bought not the paintings that pleased them but those that were worth the most and looked upon their collections as sound investments.

Mem Helena said David was a realist about everything except women and there he was adolescently romantic.

‘And what about you?’ he asked her. ‘You’re the essence of romance, the very tissue that romance is made of.’

I was frequently in Mem Helena’s bungalow before actually moving into it, and she and Tuan Ian and the baby, and later David, too, treated me as one of the family. When the baby was old enough to toddle, Tuan Ian dug a shallow pool for him in the garden under the jacaranda tree and from there, teaching him to sail plastic ducks and sailboats, I heard everything that was said on the near-by terrace. Sometimes I even called out a comment, or one of them called to me, and sometimes, especially after David came, we all sat round the pool and played with the baby and the dogs.

I remember once David said, ‘The trouble’ with this is that it’s all too idyllic, one day it’ll blow up right under our noses.’ David was an accurate prophet.

Mem Helena had laughed at him and sang a song she said came from India and had been sung by the English there when they had been in danger during the last century. The last words of it were ‘And here’s to the next man who dies!’ and when she sang it in the sunny garden I felt suddenly cold, although none of what happened had even been conceived at that time.

One of the things Mem Helena said to me in this morning’s visit keeps repeating itself in my mind and I wonder how much truth there is in it. She said I had been too long in European houses, seen too much and understood too little.

‘In fact, Zainah,’ she said sorrowfully, playing with the smooth brown mangosteens, ‘you are a most complex mixture of sophistication and naïveté, wisdom and foolishness, and I suspect we, especially David and myself, are much to blame.’

‘But isn’t that what all people are?’ I asked. ‘Mixtures? You always say that nothing is ever entirely black or

entirely white, neither situations, nor characters, nor circumstances.'

'That's not quite the point, is it,' Mem Helena answered. 'Intelligence,' she went on, 'like knowledge, can be a very dangerous thing because it is so easy to abuse.'

She thinks, of course, that I have abused both. The truth is, as I see it, that we are *all* guilty, the manager's Mem for starting it, me for continuing it, David for using it, my father for pressing it, the manager for having the sort of estate where it was inevitable and even Mem Helena herself for encouraging me in it. By 'it' I mean my relationship with Europeans. I tried to say some of this to her but she shook her head at me.

'The law doesn't want a multiple culprit,' she said. 'It wants one victim. It tries to get the proper one, but it isn't always successful.'

'Where does this law come from?' I asked.

'Mostly from Napoleon and Justinian,' she said.

'Isn't that somewhat long ago?' I suggested. 'Shouldn't things be modernized to suit today's conditions?'

'There's nothing modern about murder,' Mem Helena said shortly.

I know who both Napoleon and Justinian are, for David has shown me the one on the screen and the other in books he got from the lending library in Kuala Lumpur. I dare say it's reasonable for a conqueror who breaks every known law to lay down a code of law; it's a negative way of arriving at something positive, like walking backward. As for Justinian, David maintained it was his wife who had the brains, and it makes sense for a prostitute to work out a system of laws so that her kind can know exactly how to avoid which penalty. I'm not interested in the law, I don't care at all what it does to me, and anyway I am certain my father and the Imam can deal with it as it should be dealt with. After all, that's been their function in the kampong.

There are four people in my life who have made me think, for I don't imagine one can be taught to think. You

either are capable of thought and then can be shown how to reason, or you aren't. My father is one, because I realized even as a child that he loved me more than my sisters simply because I reminded him of my dead mother, who was the only woman he ever truly loved. He has always been indulgent and easy-going with me, and proud of me, too. I have often thought how fortunate I am to have no elder brother to order me about.

I am grateful that he encouraged my friendship with Mem Helena, for that resulted in some happy years. Although he understood I would learn a different way of life from her, he never realized *what* way that would be. It was not knowledge I could pass on to him. She and Tuan Ian have, on occasion, come to our house for a curry which they, like us, eat funnelled through their fingers, and I have shown Mem Helena how to prepare those of our dishes she especially likes. It hasn't worked the other way, I haven't shown western dishes to my sisters. Every time I have been with Mem Helena, I have learned something from her, not always about western ways, but about living life.

The manager's Mem, who insisted I learn English from her, made me think, too, for it was the first time I saw a household plunged in wretchedness. They were a childless couple, and she despised her husband as a drunkard, which didn't prevent him from being a good planter, and because he was ashamed of himself he hated her, so their bungalow was an ugly one filled with dissension and meanness. I don't like the bungalow any better under Ah Fan, the manager's present keep, but then perhaps he is a man who attracts disagreeableness to himself, as trees attract rain and valleys attract fog.

David made me think most of all, for he put into words many of my jumbled thoughts. I shall never forget the first time this happened, for it was in an unlikely place, in an ice-cream parlour in the nearest town to us after a cinema show. We always had sodas after a performance. He said to me, with his dark handsome head to one side

and with the hidden laughter deep in his throat, 'Do you know you were divorced at twelve?'

'Why, David,' I protested, 'how can you say anything so silly? I have never been married. How could I be divorced?'

'You told me the manager's Mem had you up to their bungalow when you were twelve. That's when you were divorced. You divorced the kampong.'

I was so startled that I simply stared at him, rotating the straw in my half-finished soda, and he went on seriously, his eyes smiling at me, 'And after you were divorced, you were seduced.'

It was the first time I heard the word, and although I knew what it meant I understood he wasn't using it with a sexual connotation.

'Helena seduced you to western ways and now I've come along to clinch the matter and seduce you to western ideas.'

I had often silently wondered about the attraction western ways had for me. Many of the things in our kampong life were western, of course; the radio and bicycle, the telephone in its tan booth at the roadside, the kerosene refrigerator, the electric torches we all owned, to name just material things. I always felt so long as I wore Malay dress, observed the religious customs of my family and refrained from the western habits of smoking and drinking alcohol and eating pork, I remained intact as a Malay. But year by year I slowly spent more time with Mem Helena and less with my family, even living up at the bungalow and sleeping in the nursery with the baby. Perhaps the western equivalent of my undefined position in Mem Helena's household would be that of a paid companion. I received money only for specific duties I was asked to undertake, but the rest of the time I stayed around anyway. In my heart, I far preferred the bungalow to the kampong.

The first time I ever wore western dress was at Mem

Java and, like me, she loves flowers and plants. In her lounge there were ugly tiangs, supporting columns of jungle hardwood, that grew up around the room like forgotten trees, and she had made little troughs at the base of each so that flowering vines curled around them, bringing the garden inside. Because the bungalow was on a hill-top, her flowers were grown in wide terraces that stepped down to a sloping lawn, and the long driveway to the bungalow was lined with van der Joachims always in bloom, rigid mauve sentinels that never lost their stiff dignity.

The lounge opened out on to a wide terrace. Except at night or when it rained, the folding French doors were never closed. They were the only glass-paned doors in the bungalow, all the other doors were wooden and there were no windows, just wooden shutters. Only the manager's bungalow had glass windows and screening. If it rained during the day and the windows had to be closed, the only light in the room was from the French doors, and it was insufficient to read or sew by except right next to the doors themselves. Electricity came on only at night.

I once asked Mem Helena why the bungalow was so designed that the bedroom overlooked the kitchen quarters and got all the noise and odours, and the floors were laid in such a way that dirt accumulated in every corner, and the whole house was held together by a series of shallow indoor shelves that had constantly to be cleaned, and why, above all, there were four huge electric fans to combat the afternoon heat with but no electricity to run them by until evening, when they weren't needed.

'Because no architect was employed to design company bungalows,' Mem Helena said, 'it was left to the engineers who were inexperienced at housing construction and were anyway never going to live in what they recommended,' and when I frowned she burst out at me in one of her rare furies of exasperation, 'Zainah, can't you learn that everything the westerner does isn't necessarily clever? There's no law in God's world to prevent the westerner from being an ass and a fool and many of us are!'

But non-operable fans and lack of day-time electricity and absence of glass panes and smallness notwithstanding, Mem Helena's bungalow was a lovely place. It had an atmosphere of serenity and opulence and permanence. This was mostly because of her personal possessions but also because the manager had nominated Tuan Ian to succeed him when he retired, and to keep Tuan Ian happy he allowed the bungalow plumbing to be fixed whenever it broke down, and permitted a constant water-supply, a luxury none of the other assistants' bungalows could obtain. He also let her have two gardeners, but then he had four himself which was double his allotment.

By the time I met Mem Helena, I could manage the western table implements, the forks and spoons and knives, as I had seen all that – and experimented with it for fun – at the manager's bungalow where his Mem showed me how she wanted her table set, with linen place-mats and cruet-sets and a flower arrangement in the middle, candles at night and butter curled into balls in an iced dish. At Mem Helena's I learned yet a bit more – how to use the small forks for shrimp and oysters, the distinction between a meat fork and a fish fork and I even became quite proficient at that pitfall of all people not born to the fork, I managed *peas* very well.

Since there was no longer a club on the rubber estate, nor any form of amusement, it became the habit of the assistants to gather every evening on Mem Helena's terrace for punch and a pipe and to watch the sunset. This ritual amused me at first. I went so far as to think perhaps it had some religious significance for them, because nightly they changed from their sweaty work-clothes into fresh shirts and trousers, and Mem Helena wore what she called a cocktail dress and they all sat down solemnly in the easy chairs on the terrace, lit pipes or cigarettes, clutched their drinks and faced the sun. It is the only bungalow on the estate with a view, and on clear days one can see all the way to the Indian Ocean and watch the sun plunge into it. The sunsets are spectacular, I have often watched them,

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but never so formally. Westerners are formal at very odd times. I asked Mem Helena about it.

'It isn't a religious act the way you mean it,' she explained, 'it's just that they want to keep up their standards out here away from home, and one way of doing so is to dress and act as if they *were* back home.'

'But surely they don't watch sunsets in England?' I objected. 'Everybody says it's foggy and rainy there!'

'It isn't the sunset that matters,' Mem Helena qualified. 'The sunset is just an excuse for them.' We spoke of the young men as 'them' because they were men and we were women.

'What would they be doing if they were back home?' I asked.

'They'd be bathed and dressed, and if they lived in the cities they'd be in their club with friends, or at a bar having a drink with a young woman, and if they lived in the country they'd be with their families or in the local pub or visiting. The point is, they'd be relaxed and in clean clothes and doing something sociable,' Mem Helena said, 'so they're doing those things here, too, as best they can.'

'Suppose they didn't?' I wanted to know. 'What would happen then?'

'They'd get slovenly, careless about their appearance, slack about their jobs, and I suppose eventually they'd be fired for incompetency. It's so easy for a European to ...' She hesitated and I said quickly,

'Go native?' I knew the term from the films.

'That's a term that doesn't apply here,' she said defensively. 'It's not "going native", it's a slow deterioration of one's own values, a giving up of one's principles, an insidious rot until the day comes when one is dirty, lazy, useless, ugly, without any code, any morals, a slob of an animal.'

Mem Helena's eldest boy was a baby at that time, and I often stayed in the nursery for his six o'clock feeding, so that when I appeared on the terrace to say goodbye and go home Tuan Ian usually asked me if I'd like an orange

squash. At first I was shy, and refused. The stiff silent young men, with their carefully tidied hair and spotless clothes and similarity of attitude, rather awed me.

It was they who spoke to me first, they called me by name and, looking at Mem Helena, I understood I was to reply in kind. They treated me politely, if casually, and I think now that Mem Helena must have told them I am a penghulu's daughter and should be treated with respect. Although I've joined them for coffee and cake in the village coffee-house, and talked to them around the estate or in Mem Helena's or the manager's bungalow, I never went out with any of them. David was my first European escort and that was more Mem Helena's doing than his.

Although I didn't bring western ways back to the kampong with me, I *did* bring Mem Helena's discarded magazines from England and the States and France, and my sisters pored over them avidly, making a voyage of discovery into my new world. They neither spoke nor read English, but became sufficiently familiar with the fashion magazines to recognize the names of designers, Fath and Lanvin-Castillo and Sophie of Saks. They thought themselves terribly knowledgeable about Europeans because of what they picked up from the magazines.

When Mem Helena and Tuan Ian went on leave, after their four-year tour on the estate, I was stranded. Their absence affected me more keenly than I had anticipated, and although I had tried to prepare myself for the void that would occur, things were much worse than I could cope with. I was too far removed from kampong ways to re-embrace them. I saw the kampong as a narrow-minded, restricted and unambitious settlement where people lived immunized from the outside world, absorbed in petty trifles. In desperation, I asked my father to let me go to town and take a job. Any Malay girl who speaks English is always sure of finding respectable work.

My father was astounded. But he saw not only my unhappiness and restlessness with kampong life, but my obvious misfitness. I won't go so far as to say I had grown

out of the kampong, but I certainly had grown away from it. Furthermore, he was reluctant to part with me because I was his favourite, and then he felt guilty at maintaining me in unhappiness instead of giving me a chance in town. In the end he consulted with the Imam.

The Imam is a Haji, of course, and his trip to Mecca took place before I was born. He always dressed in immaculate white and wore a perforated white leather cap, something like the bathing caps worn by male swimmers who want to keep their hair out of their eyes. He and my father had grown up together, and he was quite aware of the problem I was causing in the household.

The result of the conference was that I was permitted to go, but with several conditions. I was to take the bus in the morning into town and was allowed a week to find work, provided I stayed with a Malay family who lived in a kampong on the fringe of the town. When I found work, my father would come and inspect my working conditions and assure himself I was all right.

Elated, I packed both my European and Malay clothes in a basket, accepted a generous sum of money from my father and set off, relieved to have escaped the kampong routine, my sisters' senseless chatter and the strict surveillance of my father and the Imam.

I was extraordinarily lucky. A government-subsidized handicraft shop ran a small business in the centre of town for the rare tourist and the Europeans who wanted silver and horn and basketry 'souvenirs' of the country. Sales-girls were hard to come by, for the Europeans had no women to spare to work in the shop, and nobody else wanted to. It was a job made exactly for my abilities: I could speak English, keep the simple accounts and arrange the displays to their best advantage.

I telephoned the village coffee-shop and left word for my father that I was already established, and he came to see me the next morning. He was impressed with the speed with which I'd found work, and pleased with the job itself. He treated us both to a lavish curry in a Tamil restaurant

and then took the bus back to the kampong, leaving me on my own.

Looking back at those five months in town, I can only think I was mad or enthralled, bewitched, for that period. No doubt every so-called sane and normal person has attacks of aberrations, but surely none as extreme as mine, as contradictory to my true nature, for I incline towards reserve and modesty. I was neither of those things in town.

I've tried to understand the self I was at that time and I can only think that I became another and unfamiliar person, as if some stranger had borrowed my body. My promiscuity was to me like the first box of chocolates discovered by a bonbon-loving fatty.

The first week of my life in town, after the novelty had worn off, was dull, for the family I lived with kept kampong hours. The store had only three customers all week and I arranged and re-arranged the displays until that bored me, and then I borrowed English books from the cold-storage's lending library and read all day long by the plate-glass shop-window. The worlds opened to me by these novels were as exotic as the moon, and I drifted along in a sensation of unreality, concerned with the doings of Scarlett O'Hara in a war in the States I'd never heard of (but then, do many Americans know about our emergency?), plunged into a Parthian war in the time of Julius Caesar in a part of Europe I didn't know existed even today, entranced by teen-age life and sex in a small New England town.

Then Dick walked into the shop one afternoon and, after staring embarrassedly at a shelf of hand-beaten silverware, blurted out an invitation to accompany him to the cinema that evening.

Dick was a Eurasian boy. His mother was Indian and his father an English planter. I don't think the marriage had ever been solemnized, as was so often the case in the town's Eurasian colony, and the Eurasians kept pretty well to themselves. They are a sensitive lot, inclined to carry a chip on their shoulder. Dick explained he had seen me

through the big plate-glass window of the handicraft shop and had walked back and forth before it for a full week looking at me before plucking up the courage to ask me to go out with him. He had no idea that diversion was the very thing I longed for.

The town, like most of Malaya's towns, was just a sprawling overgrown Chinese village with some European homes clustered on a hill to benefit from the breeze and the view. There were six cinema houses catering to mostly a Chinese and English-speaking audience, but Tamil and Malay films were also run. A two-storey modern cement hotel accommodated the Europeans and Chinese salesmen who came through, and there was an old-fashioned rest-house for Government servants which overlooked a small lake surrounded by a park. British and Australian troops were barracked outside the town, winding up their operations against the terrorists, but they patronized their favourite bars and the whore-houses and I saw little of them.

After the cinema, the usual American western, we met some friends of Dick's – all Eurasian – in an outdoor Chinese garden restaurant where we had prawns and Coca-Colas, and among the group was Virginia, a buxom, heavy-featured girl with a dazzling smile and thick, wavy black hair, dressed in the latest European style. We struck up a friendship, and Virginia told me her married sister took in P.G.s. Perhaps I might like a room in her sister's house in town, and then I could walk to work instead of waiting for the bus or a trishaw every morning? We spoke only English and some of the terminology was new to me; it cost me artful questioning to ascertain P.G. meant paying guest.

It seemed her sister had just moved into one of those box-like, modern cement houses not quite in the European quarter, but not in the native quarter either, and on the roof, where the laundry was hung up daily to dry, there was an extra unit, a room with small bathroom which had been fitted up as a bedroom-sitting room with chintz and

furniture and a small kerosene cooking stove, linen and crockery in the European style. That was at my disposal and I jumped at the chance to get away from the kampong. I was certain my father would raise no objection, he was too proud of my success in town to complain. A job in the handicraft shop was a far step above tapping rubber trees, as my sisters were doing.

Two days later I was installed on the roof. It had the disadvantage of being bakingly hot during the daytime when I wasn't there, and the advantage of being thoroughly private in the early mornings and evenings when it was like a vast terrace overlooking one section of the town. Virginia's sister liked the extra pin-money I brought in and, once over her disappointment at having an Asian instead of European P.G., was friendly enough to supply me with two rattan chairs and a table for the roof so that in the cool of the morning I took my breakfast outside, feeling sophisticated and worldly but still unreal, like a heroine out of one of the many novels I so assiduously read.

When the Eurasians were friendly with non-Eurasians, these were usually Sikhs, and that's how I met Amar Singh and my debauchery started. After a movie, our Eurasian crowd – for we often moved about in groups – went to the hotel for drinks. There were several Sikh youths in the bar whom both Dick and Virginia knew, and we joined them, fusing the two groups.

Among this turbaned Sikh group was Amar Singh, very tall as most Sikhs are, still slim (as so few of them remain) and beardless, so I knew he wasn't a strongly practising Sikh, with a slight black moustache, fine chiselled lips, an aristocratic even arrogant nose, the bright, black, clever eyes of his race and an eye-catching pink turban that suited him admirably. He was several cuts above the rest of us, for he was being educated in England and was back home for his vacation. His family was large and rich and that evening he had borrowed his older brother's TR2, my first experience of a sports car.

Dick was such a cautious, careful lad, so hopelessly well-

mannered in a Eurasian-conscious attempt to play the European gentleman, that he had begun to get badly on my nerves with his artificiality. I was interested in Amar Singh and he, quite obviously, was delighted with me. When he offered to drive me home, I accepted at once, throwing over Dick as casually as a child tosses away an unwanted doll.

Amar Singh and I (and the TR2 sports car) became inseparable. He called for me at the store for the long lunch break, and we took the car and a picnic spread that I prepared in the morning and motored to any of the many surrounding rubber estates where we found a secluded cool spot under the trees and ate lunch and drank tea out of the handsome Thermos he gave me, talked and played records on his portable victrola.

I learned a good deal about England from Amar Singh, for he saw the country as I would see it, through Asian eyes. He told me about the English addiction to weak bitter beer, about the bleak industrial towns, about the staggered closing hours of London's pubs, and the jewel-like theatres, the fabulous restaurants, the Houses of Parliament and huge department stores, a thousand times larger than our finest Indian-owned emporium.

He had also been to Paris, and after we had seen a film with a Parisian background, he drew me a rough map of the city and indicated the hotel he had lived in on an island in the middle of the river that flows through the Paris heart, and described the wonderful life he had led there, idling along the quays examining the bookstalls, sitting in boulevard cafés, going to the museums. He said in Paris everybody stared at him in his turban and smiled and were helpful, whereas in England everybody made a great to-do about *not* staring at him, but weren't at all helpful.

'The English never interfere,' he said.

'Like the Chinese?' I suggested. 'They never interfere, either, unless it's a member of the family.'

'I wonder if the English would interfere even then?' he speculated. 'But no, they're not like the Chinese, they have

no gaiety, they're a very disciplined people. Until they get drunk,' he added thoughtfully, 'then they are lunatics.'

Every evening he called for me on my rooftop, just as the quick half-hour tropical twilight fell, and I gave him iced orange-crush which Virginia's sister let me keep in her refrigerator. Then we went off to the movies, we were both tremendous movie fans, or, once in a while, to the sole wayang or dance-hall in the town, but everything the orchestra played there sounded like joget, even if originally written as a waltz or a tango. After that we had dinner in a Chinese or Indian restaurant, or sometimes from a Chinese street-stall, seated comfortably in the low open sports car and served by an old crone who thought we were crazy to buy noodles and chicken from her when with such an expensive car we could obviously have gone to the hotel or the resthouse.

Amar Singh was my first lover.

It happened quite naturally. We were picnicking on a Friday, and the following day was a national holiday as the store was closed.

'Have you ever been up into our mountains?' he asked me.

'No,' I admitted. 'I'm afraid I haven't really been anywhere.'

'If my brother will lend me the car, would you like to go?' he invited.

'I should love to,' I agreed. 'Where are they?'

'Over there, to the north,' and he waved his hand above his head. 'You'll need a sweater and overnight things, it's a long drive.'

'I haven't a sweater,' I confessed, feeling foolish.

'Never mind, I'll buy you one. A friend of my father's owns a bungalow up in the hills which he rarely uses, just for New Year's parties or St. Andrew's celebrations and things like that. He keeps servants in it, and if nobody's visiting it we can have it. We'll sit before an open fireplace. Would you like that? Have you ever done that?'

I never had. Amar Singh did a lot of complicated long-

Amar Singh had to fly back to England. He gave me his address and promised to write to me at the store, but I felt this was the end of our knowing each other. He didn't plan a return to Malaya, there was more of a future for him in London or Paris than as the fourth son of a locally prominent provincial family. We never spoke of love or marriage, and when we parted, although I experienced a sense of loss for I was alone again, I was relieved at the rest it promised me, for Amar Singh and I excited each other to insatiability.

But now I had a reputation. I also had half a dozen beautiful gold bracelets and a heavy neck-chain with a white enamelled butterfly at the end of it, set in a heart. Amar Singh had made it amply clear to his group that although I might look cool and aloof and reserved, I was a marvel of passion in bed and, also, I was expensive.

Several of his friends approached me for dates and took me to the cinema and to dinner, but they didn't attract me and I wanted none of their amorous advances. I was not a prostitute, for sale at a stipulated price to any customer. I was a courtesan available only to the man who pleased *me*. I knew I was seeking another lover; my body was alive, desiring and demanding satisfaction, but I insisted on a lover as clean and virile and appealing as Amar Singh.

I found him in a person far outside my circle of acquaintances. He was the youngest son of a millionaire Chinese towkay who was away in Hong Kong vacationing with the rest of the family.

Sang Lee, when I first saw him, was humped on a bar-stool in the hotel that served as normal meeting-place for all the English-speaking Asians. He was drinking Carlsberg and playing the juke box. A stocky youth, he was one of the few Chinese who actually looked his age; most of them are years older than they appear to be. Younger than I, he had just turned sixteen.

I noticed his excellent white teeth, free from the Chinese habit of encasement in gold with cut-out patterns of clubs or diamonds or hearts to show the ivory underneath. He

was immaculate, his white shirt unrumpled, his hair neat, his dark trousers well-fitting.

It was half past five in the afternoon and I was waiting for Virginia to join me for the movies. Virginia wasn't always the most punctual person, she had the Indian mania for incessant chatting and could lose all sense of time. Sang Lee and I were alone in the hotel bar, and I sat down at one of the wicker tables and prepared to wait. I bought a lottery-ticket from the barman, who knew me, and then listened to the juke box. It was just finishing a tune and Sang Lee, fishing in his pocket for a coin, smiled widely at me and asked, hardly raising his voice, 'What would you like to hear?'

'Anything,' I said, surprised. 'St. Louis Blues,' I added, for I didn't want to appear either ignorant or indecisive.

'I hope it's a Satchmo recording,' he said anxiously. I had no idea what he was talking about, so I smiled and nodded and said I hoped so, too. 'Could I order you a drink?' he offered, 'a limeade?' and because he was so friendly and easy, I said 'yes'.

I had already learned one important lesson: those of us women - Malay, Chinese or Indian - who speak fluent English are immediately a privileged group apart. We are not treated like the whores some of us are and others of us may become, but like the ladies our escorts wish we were. Little did the manager's Mem know, when she insisted I learn proper English and not kitchen English, to what use her careful education would be put.

By six o'clock Virginia hadn't come and I suspected she had completely forgotten about our engagement. Sang Lee suggested he replace her as my companion, and we went together to see the film I had selected, arriving just in time for a newsreel.

'I've anyway nothing to do and nowhere to go,' Sang Lee told me as he guided me across the street. 'I just came to town because I can't stand rattling around all alone in that big house. Most of the servants are also on holiday; it's entirely dead at home.'

That was how, after the movies, by a few direct questions I learned Sang Lee lived in a seaside palace with nine servants; a 'marble mausoleum', he called it, that was faced by three small islands stretched out into the sea and connected by marble bridges. The outermost of these islands he described in detail, its curved white beach, its outdoor marble bar, its air-conditioned dressing-rooms, the multi-coloured contour chairs and rubber mats for sunbathing. It sounded like the sort of thing I had read about in film magazines.

Sang Lee stayed on in town, and I knew after the second evening spent in his company that he would invite me to the marble mausoleum and that I would go. I wondered for how long I should ask for absence from the store, and what story I should tell Virginia's sister and my father. In the end, I told the one and wrote the other that I was being sent on a buyer's trip for the store to the coast, all expenses paid, and felt this was a valuable experience I shouldn't miss. I could always pick up some baskets and mats and carving and water-colours to bring back to the store as pretended samples, just to show I had not been idle. The store was obliging, it was used to transient salesgirls, and as I promised to return, they hired a ganti girl for those few weeks. Virginia's sister didn't care what I did so long as I paid the stipulated rental, and Virginia herself, although she didn't believe my story, accepted it.

In one of the Lee family's half dozen cars, a Mercedes Benz, Sang Lee drove me to the resort town where he lived. This was several years before the military moved in and turned the town into a huge barracks, but the Lee house still stands in its lovely isolation. During the drive I made a discovery that gave me pause for considerable thought. I noticed that Sang Lee was uneasy and edgy and I wondered why, and suddenly he blurted out, 'You know, I've *slept* with girls before, but I've never *lived* with one. I might not be very good at it.'

It was then that I realized Sang Lee assumed I was an experienced professional. He also assumed, as I quickly

learned, that I had been the keep of some wealthy English planter and that accounted for my fine command of English. I did not contradict either assumption.

I had never before been in a Chinese millionaire's home; in fact, I'd never seen one close up. We drove through wrought-iron gates, up a long orchid-lined driveway flanked by smooth-clipped lawns, until we stopped under an elaborate dazzling white porte-cochère wide enough for two cars at a time. Heavy steel gates had been rolled back from the entrance for our coming, and fresh flowers and plants were everywhere in the house. The house itself was an awesome, cave-like building, squarish and grand, with one high-ceilinged, spacious, shadowy marble-floored room leading to another, marble nymphs and satyrs and cupids were everywhere, there was much scarlet plush furniture, many big (and I thought bad) oil-paintings of family members framed in gilt, and wrought-iron pahit and coffee tables and magazine racks in abundance.

My room was Sang Lee's eldest sister's, he said it was the most feminine and would have all the gadgets I needed, brushes and powder-boxes and perfume. His room was next door and both rooms looked out towards the sea. I saw a sloping stretch of lawn that reached down to the first islet, and I could just make out, from my window, the glint of white marble bridges connecting the islets and the tall palms of the outermost one.

We soon developed a routine, sleeping late every morning, breakfasting on the terrace with the scent of jasmine, roses, frangi-pani and gardenias around us, then we lounged away the day on the crescent beach of the third islet, chatting, playing the records from Sang Lee's jazz collection of which he was immensely proud, drinking iced fruit juice and nibbling at pâté, pineapple, caviar, papaya and hard Swedish biscuits.

Sang Lee taught me how to swim a steady Australian crawl, he taught me how to wear a bikini without blushing, he introduced me to all his favourite musicians, people I'd never heard of with odd names, Satchmo and Fats and The

Duke, and he taught me how to dance properly, not our monotonous (however graceful) joget and ronggeng, but the varied western dances, Viennese waltzes that made me dizzy at first, Brazilian sambas, Argentine tangos, the English slow waltz and the fast American quick steps. I received a thorough education in modern diversions at his hands during our month together, and I often thought how upside-down it was that I should learn so much of western tastes and habits from a Chinese.

Every night we took the Mercédès and went out somewhere, for dinner, for dancing, for the cinema. It was in an exclusive and expensive seaside restaurant patronized by senior planters and their costly companions that I first saw Yoke Chan and understood what a real professional looked like and acted like, and next to her smooth sophistication and startling, individualistic beauty I felt gauche, shy and inept. I never spoke to her, nor she to me, although I sometimes found her looking at me thoughtfully, and then she would incline her head just slightly and give me a slow, quizzical little smile. It never occurred to me our paths could possibly cross.

Yoke Chan always wore bright-coloured, perfectly-tailored brocade cheongsams, slit high on either thigh. Her hair hung in two plaited pigtails on either side of her face, framing it, and she always wore fresh large blossoms over her ears. The exquisite proportions of her classic figure were never blurred by accessories. She wore a cheongsam, flowers, diamonds and nothing else. Sang Lee's comment on her was that she'd 'been around a long time'. If she had, she didn't show it.

I liked Sang Lee. I also liked the life of opulent ease he showed me, never suspecting I was a total foreigner to it. I felt I had come a long way from the kampong with its chickens always underfoot scratching for food, and the goats wandering about, and the turkeys trying to commit suicide in their pens. The kampong looked shabby next to the neatness of this moneyed life.

When I left Sang Lee to return to town and the store,

four months of Mem Helena's six months' leave were over. I no longer missed her so acutely, but I longed for her return because, in my heart, I was ashamed of what I was doing although at the same time I was proud of what I was learning, the information as well as the polish. When Sang Lee's family returned, he was being sent alone to Hong Kong as a reward for having stayed behind and minded the family possessions. He wanted me to come with him, but this was a more daring step than I felt equipped to take.

When he left me he gave me a beautiful Malay outfit, lavishly embroidered in silver, and a choker of Japanese pearls that glowed against my skin. He thanked me for my company and the pleasure I'd given him, and remarked he'd be lucky to find another like me. But when he tried to make a definite appointment to see me after his return from the Hong Kong vacation, I avoided committing myself and, of course, I never gave him my kampong address which neither the store nor Virginia's sister knew.

For the next two months I went from hand to hand in search of a lover to suit me. I chose only clean youths, good-looking boys of fastidious tastes, but I never found one I wished to stay with for more than a night or a week-end.

The presents I acquired didn't particularly interest me for, by my own standards, I was rich indeed in jewellery and clothes. I never went with a youth who didn't speak English. Thinking back on that period, I don't recognize myself as Zainah at all. I was somebody else. One more thing I must add: I never went with a European, although often the English and Australian soldiers, pimply-skinned and sweat-stinking, followed me in the street, importuning me.

Then, when the day came to return to the kampong and to see Mem Helena again, I simply changed back into what I had been before. As soon as I got out of the bus at the stop near my father's house, I shed the town experience as if it had all happened to somebody else. In fact, as I

walked up our tiled stairs on to the plant-hung veranda, I felt inexplicably cleansed, pure again. I knew that that brief life of lasciviousness was behind me forever. It had been a palliative to tide me over a bad time; I wouldn't return to it. I prayed my reputation would never reach as far as the kampong.

The first fortnight after my return I was seldom at home for I was helping Mem Helena clean the bungalow, uncrate all the things that had been stored away, and unpacking what she had bought abroad. She gave me two lovely dresses and a beautiful red handbag and a large bottle of French perfume called 'Femme'. I particularly liked the name. I was busy and happy and hardly thought of the town life. When I did, it was with amazement that I, Zainah, should have done the things I had done.

The young men, with different faces, soon came back to the veranda for the sunsets, and one day Mem Helena told me that the newest assistant, who had just arrived and whom I hadn't yet met, would be joining us that evening. He had an American mother who had been a *débutante* in a place called Cleveland, Ohio, and his father had been an Englishman of substantial means, but both parents were dead. The only other thing that was known about him was his service career: he had been fighting in Palestine and then with the air force in Korea. Mem Helena said she'd already seen him and he was very handsome, she winked at me and we laughed together, quite unaware that David and tragedy were to be synonymous in our lives.

I don't really know if my actual story begins with that evening when David walked out on to the terrace, or whether it begins at whatever indefinite period it was when the manager became too sick to care about running the estate. Mem Helena claimed he wasn't really sick, just fraught with hangovers, frustrations and miserliness, but Tuan Ian maintained he had amoebic dysentery and swollen arteries. I gathered both were unpleasant and serious.

'If he's so ill,' Mem Helena asked often, and reasonably

enough, 'why doesn't he retire, and let you take over as he promised, in name as well as in practice?'

'I'm paid to run the estate for him,' Tuan Ian said. 'Any senior assistant pitches in when his manager is sick. Furthermore, he can't retire because he needs the money.'

'I don't understand,' Mem Helena said, spreading her fingers in a curious gesture peculiarly hers, 'I know he's very rich. We know his salary, his bonus, the percentages he makes on deals with the contractors, and the cases of free whisky and brandy he gets. Ah Fan told Zainah there are over a hundred bottles of Scotch in his store cupboards!'

'That's probably all true,' Tuan Ian conceded, 'but that's *now*. You always forget he lost four years in Siam on the railroad, and he has to make up today for what he didn't earn then.'

Tuan Ian was a tall and spare man with a kind, lined face who never lost his temper and rarely raised his voice. He was extremely well liked and known to be incorruptible, one of those men on whom honesty sits as easily as his skin. Reliable as day and night, it was a foregone conclusion that a sick man wouldn't hesitate to leave everything in his capable hands. My father always spoke highly of Tuan Ian.

What I want to point out is that *if* the manager hadn't been constantly ill, through no fault of his own (let us assume the most charitable attitude), then Tuan Ian most certainly would have had more time – especially Saturdays and Sundays – to spend with his wife and child instead of working or conferring endlessly with the sick man. It was the practical factor of time that made it possible, convenient and natural for David to see as much of Mem Helena, and a great deal of me, too, as he did.

That first evening, while I waited with Mem Helena and Tuan Ian for him to join us, I was merely curious about him and not very interested. He was just another of a long stream of new assistants. I wondered how long he'd last. David was just a name to me.

TWO

I KNOW it would sound better if I said that immediately I saw David I fell in love with him, or that at least I had a premonition he would be important to me. It wasn't like that at all. He was just another young and green assistant, a bit graver and older than what usually came out, seated on the terrace and gazing at the sun. I paid only perfunctory attention to him. I remember thinking that at least he didn't have that fishbelly pallor so common to newcomers; he was already deeply tanned, and the only other thing I noticed was that he moved quietly with a sort of sinewy strength that was somehow very graceful, perhaps because of its animal quality, and most odd, for the young men who came out to be rubber planters were, on the whole, ungainly and awkward louts, always spilling things and knocking over glasses, clumsy as calves. There were times when I thought them no more intelligent.

My awareness of David came a few days later.

Mem Helena drove to the kampong one morning – I think one of my sisters had been ill and I took care of her so I hadn't been to the bungalow – to tell me her wash-amah was down with 'flu. She could manage the washing herself, but as there was no electricity for ironing until nightfall, and the evenings were the only time she had with Tuan Ian, she didn't want to spend them out in the five-foot way, ironing shirts, could I help her out with my old-fashioned charcoal iron?

I offered not only the loan of the iron but said I'd come along and iron yesterday's wash myself while she took care of today's.

The washing was done in a huge Shangnai jar set in the back lawn under a jacaranda tree, a foolish place as the leaves and mauve flowers always had to be fished out of the jar whenever the slightest breeze stirred. The laundry

lines were strung between trees in the sun, and the ironing-table was a short distance away under the covered alley that led between the bungalow and the cooking shed. Yesterday's wash was already dry and water-sprinkled, ready for ironing, so I set to work while Mem Helena washed today's batch which she'd left soaking in the jar while she collected me. Her kuki was down at the market and Mem Helena's little boy was sailing two plastic ducks across the shallow pool. They kept capsizing as he sloshed the water and he patiently retrieved them and started them out again in a race from side to side. He was a persistent little fellow.

We both heard the Land-Rover roar up the hill, but neither of us troubled to look up as we assumed it must be Tuan Ian home early for something. But the Land-Rover didn't stop under the porte-cochère, it continued around the bungalow and right across the kitchen lawn and drew up to a stop next to Mem Helena bent over the Shanghai jar, suds all the way up her arms.

'Do you always do your own washing?' David inquired.

He was just in my range of vision. He sat, loosely hugging the wheel, his dark hair glinting in the sun, and the towelling shirt he wore clung to his body so that he had an oddly sculptured look. His voice, although low-pitched, was carrying and distinct.

'The amah is ill,' Mem Helena said, straightening up and shaking the soap from her arms. 'Ian won't be back for another hour or so.'

'I haven't come to see Ian.'

'No? Are you lost then? Your own bungalow's just down there through the trees,' Mem Helena went on easily. 'All the new assistants get lost on the estate – don't let it worry you. They're found in the most incredible places, utterly stranded, with no idea which way to turn; every rubber tree still looks like every other rubber tree to them.'

'I'm never lost.'

'Born with a bump of direction?' Mem Helena rubbed

the back of her neck; bending over the earthenware jar was a tiring business for anybody not accustomed to it.

'Born with a sense of caution to check the spirit of adventure,' David said. 'I have a pocket compass, a reliable German one. It's seen me through two wars already, a close friend.'

'You are a practical man, aren't you?' Mem Helena said, half laughing. 'Well, then, what have you come to borrow? That's the other reason new assistants invariably call on me during their first week here.'

'Not a thing,' David said cheerfully. 'I can always make do with what I've got, I don't need much. I've come to tell you something.'

'Tell *me* something?' Mem Helena sounded startled.

'I have come to tell you that something has happened to me that I despaired of ever happening. I thought I'd have to go through life without it, which would be as bad as being blind in an art museum. And since you're responsible, you should know.'

I thought Mem Helena would speak, but she ran her hands through her hair and then dropped them to her sides and stood silently. They made an odd tableau there in the sunlight on the hilltop with the puffy white clouds sailing majestically overhead and the sun drying the washing on the lines. Mem Helena stood near something blue and it had already begun to dry, a cotton skirt I think it was, so that it had several tones of blue in it. There was something fresh and clean in this scene, the smell of soap and newly-washed cotton, the bright, clean air, Mem Helena's golden hair, David's youth. It was alive, so sparkling.

'The world has become a small place,' David said unexpectedly, still leaning against the wheel, and I realized then that economy of motion was natural to him. He didn't gesticulate and jiggle and wriggle in the usual uneasy fashion of Europeans, he sat in repose. And I've seen a great deal of it, not just as a tourist, although I've done that, too, but as a soldier and a worker. One of the nicer aspects of the world are the women in it - I've known

many of them and liked a few. I've never been able to love any. Not until now, and I want you to know.'

I thought it was a bold thing to say. Had I been in Mem Helena's shoes, I know I should have been flustered, flattered at the sentiment but dismayed at being told about it. Mem Helena put her hands in her skirt pockets and didn't even change position. She seemed to be weighing him up.

'I'm a total stranger,' she said finally. 'How can you feel anything for what you don't know?' She shook her head. 'I am married and content in my marriage, I want no disruptions, no disagreeableness, and I abhor those women who have affairs with the men working under their husbands. I'm neither bored enough, nor neurotic enough to consider such a pastime. It was kind of you to tell me how you think you feel, but from me you will have no encouragement. Let's not speak of this again.'

'You're a stranger now,' David agreed, 'but I expect to know you very well. As for feelings, if one could explain them one very likely wouldn't have them. I don't plan to be an *affair* in your life, I plan to be the man who sweeps you away from contentment and off into passion. Oh, I won't importune, or embarrass, but I shall have you, Helena, *a loving you*'

'You're unbelievable,' Mem Helena said, and I caught the note of exasperation in her voice.

'I'm truthful,' David said quickly. 'That's always difficult to believe.'

'You're brash,' Mem Helena told him slowly, 'and I think insolent, although perhaps unintentionally.'

'Oh, my God,' David said, and with an abrupt movement put the Land-Rover into gear. Over his shoulder he called to Mem Helena as he turned the vehicle around, 'I've yet to find anything insolent in telling a woman you love her. Come down from your Valhalla and meet us mortals, we aren't entirely a bad lot,' and he drove off without a backward look.

I wanted Mem Helena to know that I had heard the

talk, so I put aside the iron and went over to where she stood, twining and untwining her hands.

'What is Valhalla?' I asked her, and saw her attention focus slowly on me.

She walked over to the Shanghai jar and leaned against it and then said, 'In Teutonic mythology it's the dwelling-place of the gods and goddesses, and it must have been a dull place indeed because they were forever leaving it.' Absently, she trailed her fingers in the water and then perched on the wide rim of the jar. 'What do you make of that man?' she wanted to know and, in the same breath, 'Does it strike you as dull here, on our hilltop?'

'I've never been in love,' I confessed. 'You would know more about that than I.'

'I wonder,' Mem Helena murmured, and it suddenly occurred to me, with the clarity of a revelation, that of course she had married her husband as one clutches at a safety line when drowning. She hadn't wanted to return to Holland, where she didn't belong, she had wanted not only to remain in the East, but also in a way of life that was familiar to her and that she liked. Tuan Ian had represented all that to her. 'And is it dull here?' she persisted.

'Maybe it seems so to him,' I replied. 'He says he's seen so much that I imagine it's hard to show him anything that isn't dull. I don't think it's dull,' I assured her. 'It's the most exciting thing that's happened to me in my life, coming here and posing, and our talks, and the beautiful home, and being part of your family. But then, I haven't been to many places.'

'Do you take him seriously?' Mem Helena asked reflectively.

'Yes,' I said, amazed at the positiveness of my conviction. 'I don't think he's a man who dabbles in artificialities. He says what he means.'

'He probably can afford to,' she answered, and we both knew that she meant his position on the estate was so insignificant it didn't matter what he said, whereas in her case and Tuan Ian's, they constantly had to watch their

tongue lest a careless comment or incorrect nuance be reported back to the manager by Ah Fan's spies and Tuan Ian's career checked as a consequence. 'At least, he can afford to for a while,' she amended.

'He'll probably move on when he can't say what he means,' I said, speculatively. 'He's used to moving around. It's not like you, building up a life for a family,' and I nodded to the little boy playing in the pool with the plastic ducks.

David didn't shoot suddenly into our lives, despite the abruptness of that early declaration. He declared his position, made known his intent and then let time and proximity do the rest. During the next months I never thought of David in connection with myself. I didn't go so far as to earmark him as Mem Helena's property, but I tended to think of him – and I thought of him a lot – in relation to her. For a long time I was neither jealous nor envious. David was a personality so far removed from my sphere of life that I couldn't imagine myself with him. With Mem Helena, it was different; she spoke my language and had grown up in very similar surroundings to mine, not a kampong, of course, but a rubber estate, and she understood our mentality even if the Javanese are constantly boasting about what excellent workers they are, and what indolent creatures we are. We still think alike in important matters.

One other thing: Mem Helena's situation on the estate was both unusual and abnormal. There was no other English-speaking woman for her to talk to (or French or German or Dutch or Danish). This was exceptional. No European woman, no white woman, lived in the village or anywhere in the area. She was entirely cut off from her own sex. She lived in a world of men whose preoccupation was rubber, and she had to share their lives, their work and their concerns. I sometimes wondered what sort of men sat in London on the company board and condemned a woman of their own sort to spend four years of her life with no contact with other women. How would those men

feel if a superior power sentenced them to their next four years entirely and solely in the company of women in, for instance, the blouse business, so that the principal subject of talk would be blouses. Very likely it's an unintentional sadism on their part, an occurrence out of ignorance. In any case, had another white woman been available, I am certain Mem Helena would not have relied so much on my company. The thoughtlessness of the London men gave me my chance for a friendship that otherwise would not have occurred.

It was around this time that we began to use the coffee-shop as a sort of daytime club, just as Mem Helena's terrace was the evening club.

The coffee-shop plays an important part in this, and furthermore it was a most extraordinary one. I don't mean in its looks – it looked exactly like every other coffee-shop in any village: an oblong, green-painted room, one side totally open to the street, with a large refrigerator for iced beer and fruit crushes and cokes and Magnolia ice-cream, and wooden tables decorated with an ashtray advertising brandy, and, in acknowledgement of the Malay clients, packets of specially cooked rice wrapped in plantain leaves.

Except for this coffee-shop, and possibly one or two in Singapore or Kuala Lumpur, I've never known or heard of one where we all met and mixed, Chinese, Europeans, Indians and Malays. A coffee-shop usually caters for one race, that of its owners, and the Hindu coffee-shops keep themselves distinct from the Muslim and both hold apart from the Chinese. The European who enters any native coffee-shop is invariably a young bachelor, too broke to afford European food, and reduced to a fried rice or noodle meal or a curry.

Our coffee-shop was owned by a Chinese, Soo Song Hong, whose family was still in China but dispersed from his native village throughout the country, working in labour battalions, the husbands separated from their wives and the children in a group school away from parental

influence. Soo Song Hong was very bitter about China, and constantly lamented that he hadn't forced his family, all forty-five of them, to immigrate to Malaya with him twenty years ago.

The coffee-shop was famous for miles around because of its pound cake, and that's why we all gathered there. There's little difference between a Chinese sweet tooth and a Muslim one, or a Hindu and European one. Soo Song Hong's cake, which he made himself from a secret recipe, served toasted and hot if you liked it that way and always accompanied by strong coffee or the local beer, was something special. Mem Helena tried several times to bake a cake like it, but hers never tasted as well as Soo Song Hong's and she gave up trying to rival him. She attempted, unsuccessfully, to wheedle the recipe out of Soo Song Hong, but all he did was smile widely at her and make her a present of a whole cake.

As a child, I accepted that everybody went to Soo Song Hong's for cake, but after my sojourn in town during Mem Helena's leave, I realized how rare it was to have the four races patronize the place. Of course we Muslims and the Hindus never came at meal-times: the sweet-and-sour concoctions of Soo Song Hong's that Mem Helena found so delicious were made with pork, and the Hindus couldn't have anything to do with the spiced beef-balls rolled in egg batter. But we met frequently in mid-morning, or mid-afternoon, and David breakfasted there regularly (he said his kuki was atrocious) - a gargantuan meal of fresh pineapple or orange cut into sections, and then fried eggs and fried tomatoes and fried sausages which he claimed were beef when I was around, but if any of the Hindus came to speak to him while he ate, he said those same sausages were pork (they smelled good in either case), and huge hunks of toasted white bread with butter and a large tin pot of coffee. His kuki, in the meantime, was shopping at the market and used to come to the coffee-shop and show David what he had bought and present the shopping chit and ask if there was anything else David wanted. There

always was - mangoes or papaya or ginger to spice the evening meal, or black mushrooms or spring onions. I thought David's breakfast was expensive, it cost fifty cents, but he assured me that nowhere in the world had he eaten so well for so little. It came to eighteen American cents, he told me, which wasn't even enough to buy a soda in New York, or a packet of cigarettes in London.

It was David who showed us how to eat Soo Song Hong's cake with ice-cream. A slab of cake was toasted and then a scoop of chocolate set on top. It was soggy and messy, but the hot-cold sensation and combined flavours were most pleasing. He called it Hong-à-la-mode, after the proprietor, and Soo Song Hong served it as part of his menu, just as he served sharkfin soup and foo-yong-hai.

If Mem Helena and I were in the coffee-shop while David was breakfasting, we just said 'hello', but if we met in the afternoon we sat together at one of the small tables and anybody who knew us joined us - the other assistants, the Tamil lorry-contractor, the Chinese supervisor, or Abdullah from my kampong who contracted for anything going, weeding, digging drains, repairing furniture, supplying taxis. My father once said that if Abdullah had been born a European, he would have been a Jew. He was an old man now, quite well off, and he liked to distribute slices of Soo Song Hong's cakes to the children, Malay, Chinese and Indian, who stood about outside the shop watching us, the little girls with the next-to-the-last baby astride their hips.

There were no fixed meeting times for our coffee-shop rendezvous, we drifted in whenever we felt like it, and there was always somebody I knew there. David said it was the nearest thing he'd seen in Malaya to a Parisian café, where he said you sit at tiny tables, even a table especially 'yours', and where you know all the other customers, and sip small drinks - apéritifs - instead of eating cake and coffee, and where you hear spoken every language under the sun.

At no time during those first years did it occur to me to

flirt with David. It is as abhorrent to us Malays to have loose relations with a European as it is in the eyes of European (or American, I understand) society for a woman to have loose relations with a dark-skinned person. We rarely marry Europeans – silly biases aren't limited to the white man. We often adopt Chinese children and rear them as our own, orphans and abandoned children, just as the Chinese will adopt one of us and rear us as a Chinese. When we marry a Chinese, our religion insists that our partner becomes a Muslim. Perhaps here and there one of us marries a Hindu. I personally have never heard of any, but I know if we do, the Hindu must become a Muslim and not we Hindu. I am explaining all this to make it clear that David at that time was to me a sort of semi-untouchable. I never thought of David, the man, in relation to myself, Zainah, the woman. We were merely two people who knew each other and saw each other more often than we would have normally, because of my friendship with Mem Helena and David's insistence on being with her as often as he could.

Those meetings were innocent. Mem Helena was seldom alone with David, and with me around as an unwitting chaperone, the talk was never personal or sexual. I learned a great deal from listening to Mem Helena and David, and David later told me he gained an insight into the country from what I said, although I can't remember saying anything clever or profound, and whatever I spoke of had to do with kampong life. I never even referred to the town stay.

There is just one other point I must make about Soo Song Hong's coffee-shop. During the many years I frequented the shop I became so used to him shouting his orders and instructions in his native Hokkien that, without realizing it, I picked up an adequate Hokkien vocabulary, and could chat passably well in that dialect. Very few Malays speak Chinese, even if the Chinese constitute almost half our population, but almost all Chinese speak Malay, as that's the official language of the country.

My father was proud of my languages.

'She should be an ambassador's wife,' he liked to say, and the Imam, who is a very practical man, always answered, 'And where shall she find an ambassador, living as she does in a small kampong outside a Chinese village next door to an English-owned rubber estate? Tell me that.'

It is not easy to remember the exact sequence of events over the past few years because there isn't any reminder to tie them to. Or, as David once remarked, back home he could always say 'this happened in winter because there was snow on the ground', or 'this took place in spring because the apple blossoms were in bloom', but here in the equatorial tropics our climate is always the same, and at best I can say 'this happened in daytime because it was light and that happened at night because it was dark'. Sometimes the east-coast monsoons gave us a period of intense rains, or the sumatras roared up from Java, uprooting the trees, and then I could say 'this happened the year of the flood, or the year of the wind', but usually neither rain nor wind came to us in excess.

Some time shortly after David's arrival the manager was sent back to Scotland for six months' leave, during which time he was supposed to have expert medical treatment and come back in good health. Mem Helena thought a psychiatrist would do more good than a doctor for physical ailments, but Tuan Ian pointed out that in the first place the manager would never admit he needed mental help and in the second place the company would no more consider psychiatric treatment than would medical men two hundred years ago have considered disinfection or inoculations.

Ordinarily, Mem Helena and Tuan Ian would have moved into the manager's big bungalow, but this time the bungalow needed such extensive repairs and fumigation (Ah Fan tolerated vermin as one of the necessities of life) and repainting and new furniture that it was a physical impossibility to live in it while the workmen were around, especially with a small child, so they remained in the hill-

top bungalow and went daily to check up on the progress at the manager's place.

Ah Fan was packed off to town and there were certainly many sighs of relief at her departure. Although Tuan Ian ran the estate for the manager, the real power behind the throne was Ah Fan, for she made up the manager's mind for him about who should get what contract, at what price for which work on the estate, and Ah Fan made her choices not by the competence of the bidders, or with the good of the company in mind, but according to the largeness of the cuts she received from them. She was giving the best years of her life to an ageing, ailing man, and when he left her to retire to Glasgow, she was making sure she would have enough to live on comfortably, since it was unlikely she could find another failing patient to nurse.

Any Chinese keep sufficiently competent to annex a European planter to support her was invariably astute enough to make something on the side on an estate where Chinese labour was employed. Either her lord and master knew of her machinations and ignored them for the sake of domestic bliss, or was honestly unaware of them, in which case his judgment on dealings with Chinese would be worth very little. Ah Fan operated on a larger scale than most of her fellow keeps, partly because she had lasted a long time on a big estate and was knowledgeable on its ins and outs and partly because intrigue was easier for her, serving an ailing man as she did, rather than an alert and healthy youngster. Ah Fan said often enough to those from whom she extorted donations (both in kind and in cash) that a London company able to pay the manager's salary could well afford her, too, and never even miss what she cost them. During the manager's absence, she lived on credit for six months, for no store would risk refusing her; that would mean she would withdraw the manager's patronage when he returned. She had things pretty well organized to her profit.

*

What with running the estate, supervising the reconstruc-

tion of the manager's bungalow and his own original experimental work with budwood – which he claimed was the only way to distinguish himself in the industry since he lacked connections of any kind – Tuan Ian was so busy that he often skipped breakfast at home but took a snack at the manager's bungalow with the overseer supervising the work there. David wasn't slow to take advantage of this, and he formed the habit of dropping by the hilltop bungalow around breakfast time. If Tuan Ian was absent, he breakfasted with Mem Helena and me.

I am trying to reconstruct not only how things happened, but why they happened, because short of miracles and catastrophies, nothing happens out of the blue; there are always reasons.

Since I was so much with Mem Helena and David, I began to add David's vocabulary to the one I had acquired from the two Memes. David's concise English was sprinkled with Americanisms which I relished. I thought they spiced the language, naval and army expressions, expletives and plain nonsense. Once I lost my temper at my younger sister when she ineptly broke the stem of a fine orchid and I shouted at her (which of course she didn't understand) as she began to apologize, 'Oh, stow it!'

My father overheard me and came up to me and demanded, 'What does "os-do-et" mean?'

When I told him, he frowned and asked what sort of people used such an expression. I said sailors.

'You are not a sailor,' my father said. 'I forbid you to use such language.'

When I told this to Mem Helena and David, David threw back his head and shouted with laughter and told me I could just as easily say, 'Oh, can it!'

My father overheard that, too.

'And what does "okenn-et" mean?' he wanted to know, and when I explained it was the same as the other, he asked what kind of people said it and I had forgotten to ask David, so I didn't know. 'Probably soldiers,' my

father decided. 'You are not a soldier, so you won't use those words.'

But all this is only incidental. What I want to tell next is about the church, because the church figured a good deal in our life on the estate, not in a religious capacity, but as a picnic-ground and trysting place until, near the end, it became a house of death.

Because the estate was so large, it was divided up into divisions. Each division had its own assistant's bungalow (David was on No. 3 Division), its own lines where the labourers and their families were housed, its own crèche for the babies when the mothers went out tapping or weeding, its own schoolhouse and dry-goods store for the housewife who had forgotten something at the market or who hadn't time to go down to the village, and its own toddy shop open at certain hours for the consumption – on the premises – of a fresh fermented liquid made from coconut palm sap and which became so potent after twenty-four hours that it sent men berserk.

The dry-goods store was also the labourers' meeting place. David said it reminded him of the country stores in the States where villagers gathered around the stove and gossiped and drank and sometimes purchased something and more often didn't. The lines' site stores were always open-fronted, and instead of David's pot-bellied iron stove against winter ice and frost, they had kerosene refrigerators, white-enamelled and chrome-handled.

Chinese and Tamils lived side by side in the lines. The Chinese had usually settled in the country and had no wish to return to China, but the Tamils were long-term transients; they worked for twenty years and then took their savings and sailed home to retire in Travancore or Madras or some such place.

Every division had its temple for the Hindu Tamils. The Chinese went to the Buddhist temple in the village, a resplendent affair painted Nile green and strung inside with scarlet lanterns and gilt carvings and gaudy-fringed banners and red-and-gold altars. The Hindu estate temples

were very convenient, they were used on paydays bi-monthly for paying the workers, each person filing before the assistant who counted out the coins and bills on the temple porch. On holidays curries were held in them, and at other times there were always loungers perched on the railing or squatted on the floor, smoking and babbling. We Muslims had our mosque just outside our kampong, a pretty square building with a domed roof and turrets at the corners instead of minarets. At least we were true to tradition, even if we lacked a muezzin to call us to prayer as in the big cities. We still did things in the old-fashioned way.

But there was only one church on the estate, or for miles around for that matter.

It had been built by the Hindu Untouchables who had embraced Catholicism, which has always seemed to me a sensible way out of an obsolete and artificial situation. Why should a whole sector of society spend their lives as garbage collectors and sweepers just because of the caste accident of birth, when, by becoming Catholic, they can be on equal terms with the rest of mankind? The church was a one-roomed wooden building, rectangular in shape, painted white and with a spire on top copied from Singapore's St. Stephen's. It was on a hilltop and, next to Mem Helena's bungalow, had the best view on the estate. It looked not towards the sea, but towards the town, far in the distance, and the gentle foothills that led to the mountains.

A wicket-gate across the front door kept the dogs from defiling it although Mem Helena told me dogs most certainly were permitted in churches and showed me colour reproductions of paintings of the interior of St. Peter's in Rome in bygone centuries when the worshippers assembled there for gossip and their dogs played with each other behind their backs. Except for Mem Helena's two little black dogs, I have no feeling for dogs, which seems to be a Malay characteristic, but I like birds and monkeys. Mem Helena's little black dogs reminded me of animated toys, even if they were bred for killing an animal that doesn't

exist in our country. Still, they dug industriously in the rubber for imagined badger, and sometimes flushed a mouse.

Inside, the estate church was bare except for an altar at one end, with a white lace-trimmed sheet on it and a painted wooden crucifix of a particularly ugly Jesus. Around the walls were framed water colours of the stations of the cross, and the Catholics in the nearest division to the church – again David's No. 3 – saw to it that there were fresh flowers in two vases at either end of the altar.

Outside, a flame-of-the-forest in deep coral flanked one side of the church, a purple jacaranda the other and a white frangi-pani grew by the door. It was very pretty. David used to say the red blossoms that fell from the flame-of-the-forest were Christ's blood, and the white of the frangi-pani represented purity, and the purple of the jacaranda represented earthly rule.

The church is an example of the sort of knowledge I picked up from David, and from Mem Helena. I don't mean just the tidbit about the dogs in St. Peter's, but I asked David about the hideous Jesus on the cross and the letters at the top of the cross, and he told me the whole reproduction was incorrect, the Crucifixion hadn't been like that at all, even if the majority of the colour reproductions Mem Helena showed me of the Renaissance artists depicted Jesus with nails through his palms and hanging from the cross. The cross was a 'T' cross, David told me, and the framed pictures of Jesus' stations were all wrong, too, because they showed him lugging a complete cross whereas he only pulled the cross-bar. The nails were driven in not through the palms but through a soft part of the wrists, and the letters were a mocking tag that King Herod had figuratively pinned to Jesus.

I asked whose idea this gruesome business was, and David said it was the common Roman way of punishing criminals, that many thousands died crucified, in fact once a Roman highway had been lined for miles with crosses. One died of asphyxiation, he explained – the sagging posi-

tion and attendant weakness finally prevented respiration. It was a slow and ghastly death.

Despite these unpleasant associations, the church was a delightful place if one just overlooked the agonized Jesus. Mem Helena painted me seated in the doorway, framed by the frangi-pani flowers, but she said the effect was too picture-postcard to suit her.

On those days that Tuan Ian didn't come home for tiffin – and there were a lot of them – Mem Helena, David and I met at the church, spread a blanket on the ground and had a sandwich and beer luncheon while we looked out towards the hills. It was shady and private and quiet, a personal haven.

There was no priest and Mass was never said, since there was nobody qualified to say it, but it was a church all the same. It gave repose and peace and beauty.

David once said – and I remember he was eating a big juicy pickle at the time, what he called a 'kosher dill pickle' -- when we picnicked there, 'It's really better than those gigantic, cold, frightening, unfriendly Gothic monuments supposedly erected to the glory of God so that man's power will be obvious.'

I suppose from all this it must now be clear that my life really unrolled not in the kampong but on the rubber estate with the European. I won't pretend I was popular in my kampong. I was accused of putting on airs, kowtowing to the white Mem, of considering myself too good for the boys and girls I'd grown up with. It wasn't a question of being 'too good', I was 'too different', which is something else again, and the interests of the kampong and mine were now so divergent we no longer had a meeting ground.

I was getting, and 'for free' as David used to say, the sort of education a tengku's or datuk's daughter would get if she were sent to some expensive finishing school in England, but I was getting it by participating in the life of European adults and I was learning much more than a mere school curriculum. My father took my part against

the malicious tongues. He said anybody was welcome to send their daughter to Mem Helena but he could make no promise Mem Helena would accept their daughter, and anyone who wanted to could learn English, there were books obtainable. He said the kampong should be proud of a representative like me, and not jealous and envious. If he didn't silence them, he at least tempered their criticisms.

With Mem Helena, I often went to the manager's bungalow to check with her on the progress of the work going on there, and I learned how complex a European house really is with its intricate plumbing and kitchen installations and running hot water – not that anybody save the manager had hot water on tap. Mem Helena and the assistants built a fire under a drum next to their bathroom and piped in the water when they needed it – and electrical wiring for the fans and the radiogram and the appliances, floor-polisher, vacuum-cleaner, electric razor, toaster, Mix-master and any number of managerial gadgets.

Then David fell ill, nothing serious, just one of those fevers that Europeans are apt to get when all their bones ache and their very skin hurts. He had fired his kuki and hadn't found a replacement, so was fending for himself. Mem Helena suggested we go over to his bungalow and bring him some food, chicken broth and brandy and asparagus wrapped up in sliced spiced ham, delicacies to tempt a sick man's appetite.

Mem Helena wrinkled her nose as we crossed the threshold of the bungalow, for there was a strong smell of urine as water was lacking to flush the toilets and, in the interests of economy, the bungalow had been built with lidless toilets. David's bungalow was in an unfortunate location for receiving water, and the pipes that led from the source to him were so riddled with holes plugged with bits of wood that the wastage was enormous.

The bungalow was a dreary, dismal place with a windowless dining-room opening out from the lounge. I noticed that the four regulation issue dining-room chairs

had lost their seats, and slats of wood were nailed across their bottoms. The lounge furniture was no better – it was so worn and old that the cane seats of the easy chairs had burst open. The manager had a stock phrase for complaints about such conditions, ‘What the hell, man. You’re out here to produce rubber, not to live in the lap of luxury.’

David lay on a thin, soiled mattress in an unscreened bedroom. He had lowered the mosquito netting to escape the mosquitoes, bees and flies that wheeled about the room, and Mem Helena crept under the white tent to sit at the edge of his bed while I went to the kitchen shed to see about warming up the soup. We had brought it over in an empty gin bottle as Mem Helena didn’t have a spare Thermos.

The kitchen shed and the quarters for the Special Constabulary who guarded the bungalow against possible bandit attacks were all in one unit. As we had been a bandit-free, or ‘white’, area for some time, there was no longer any work for the S.C.’s, but their contracts hadn’t yet expired, so they hung on at the bungalow with their wives, listening to their radio and playing cards and talking. One of my former schoolmates, Fatimah, was married to their corporal, and she welcomed me with pleasure. Life was apt to be boring with nothing whatever to do except cook and tend babies.

Fatimah had a good figure but one of those squashed flat faces, with heavy lips that somehow look coarse. She was a cheerful, willing girl, and called the gardener for me to light the iron Dover stove in the kitchen shed. She told me she was looking after the Tuan until he found a cook. He paid her a daily wage to clean for him, market and cook his dinner for him, and she was pleased with the pin-money this earned her. She fetched a tray and dishes and utensils, so I saw he had taught her something of his tastes, and while the soup was heating I picked a few zinnias by the kitchen doorway and put them in an empty jam-jar on the tray. There was parsley in a box by the

stove, so I decorated a plate with the food and then brought the tray in, followed by Fatimah who talked steadily, explaining how she sloshed out the bathroom every morning and how the Tuan always read while he ate, a funny habit.

Mem Helena lifted the netting for me and I put the tray on David's lap. He smiled at me and I felt a warm stab of pleasure at that smile. Mem Helena went on with what she was saying: she would send some carpenters down from the manager's bungalow to mend the furniture, and if he liked she could lend him lampshades for the naked bulbs, and cushion-covers for the stained kapok, but David shook his head.

'There'd be disagreeable talk,' he told her. 'If you do anything for this bungalow you'll have to do the same for the other assistants, and I doubt you have enough lampshades and cushion-covers for all of us!'

'Well, I'll send the carpenter to all of you,' Mem Helena said. 'Everything's in such shocking neglect.'

David shrugged slightly and remarked that it hadn't anyway been much good to begin with.

'I don't know,' he said, sipping the soup directly from the bowl I'd put it in, 'there's so much complaint about the high turnover of junior assistants who come out here, but, after all, the type of man content to live in this sub-standard isn't a type one wants to give a responsible job to, and the responsible ones won't hang around under these conditions,' and he waved his hand at the room.

'You're around, and you're responsible,' Mem Helena pointed out.

'There's a reason for that,' David said, looking straight at her. 'You are aware of it because I've told you.' He looked speculatively at the shabby room: the wardrobe, too narrow to hang clothes in on a hanger, the dressing-table with cracked and rust-specked mirror, the chest of drawers, canted sideways where the legs had given out. 'Aside from a valid reason such as mine, only adven-

turers or third-raters are likely to stick it out. It's too unrewarding.'

'What do you consider Ian?' Mem Helena asked.

'The exception. There's always an exception,' David replied promptly. 'He's it.'

'Well, you know,' Mem Helena said slowly, 'all companies aren't alike. Some of them *do* take a genuine interest in their employees and are modern and progressive, even generous about living conditions and bonuses. Then there are others,' she made a grimace, 'who are plainly so greedy for profit that they'll unhesitatingly, even unknowingly, sacrifice an able employee for the sake of an immediate return that looks good in their yearly balance sheet, regardless how uneconomical this may be as a long-term proposition. There are others who work entirely through agents and let the agents do exactly as they please so that any young manager – the old ones are always too powerful, too "in" to bother about – has to decide whether to serve his company loyally and get into the agents' bad books, or whether to please the agents at the expense of the company, who will anyway never find out the difference.'

As David was about to speak, she held up her hand. 'You're going to ask how. It's easy.' She shrugged. 'Agents handle not only rubber estates, but lots of other products – typewriters, mattresses, machinery, foodstuffs. The agency says to the manager of a rubber estate, "Well, old boy, you buy your typewriters for the office through us, we get a commission, you know, mustn't let us down." Then the manager says, "But I can get a better typewriter cheaper from somebody else, and so save the company who employs me \$600 or \$1,000." The agents don't like that, so they set out to eliminate such an unobliging employee and the company will have no idea why suddenly a good man gets bad reports from the agents.'

'Oh, come, Helena,' David protested, 'surely no company –'

'Surely lots of them,' she cut in sharply. 'There are also companies who have no practical idea of planting and they

pay high salaries and bonuses to managers out of ignorance, when without their knowledge or comprehension an estate is shockingly run, unweeded, eroded, lallang-ridden, the trees wounded from careless tapping, kampong style.' She bit her lip at that and then said, 'I'm sorry, Zainah, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.'

'It's all right,' I said, 'we all know the smallholders aren't distinguished for good planting.'

Although I think, on the whole, the Chinese smallholder is a better planter than the Malay smallholder, we're not so greedy. The Chinese smallholder looks at his rows of seedlings and decides he can't stand the unused space between them, so he promptly plants bananas between the rows and feels good because he hasn't wasted any land. At least when we plant rubber, we stick to rubber, although of course our standards aren't as high as the European-owned estates, partly because we lack the money and largely because we're too easy-going to trouble to learn modern techniques.

'I'm not a planter by birth,' David said, 'I'm a wanderer, an Ishmael.'

'Ishmael?' I repeated, puzzled. 'What was that?'

But Mem Helena was smiling, and I thought at once this must have a secret significance. When she spoke I was sure I was right.

'We could do with a Queequeg,' she said. 'No doubt there were some like him when the Fijians were fighting with us here. But spare me Ahab!'

I remembered the three words and looked them up later in the dictionary, but they weren't in it, so I knew this sort of talk must be a lovers' code familiar to Europeans. Although David had looked curiously at me when I asked no further questions, he did no explaining.

That was the day he told us something of his boyhood, and we listened raptly because it was all as foreign to Mem Helena as it was to me. His English father had had the profession of designing diamond jewellery, and his American mother he referred to as 'a drinking débutante'. Both

parents had died before he was fifteen (but not, he assured us, before he had been disgraced) in an automobile accident after a New Year's Eve party in New York. He had been an only child.

'And largely forgotten,' he said.

We gathered from his casual references to a permanent flat in London's Park Lane and another on Fifth Avenue in New York and hotel suites in Paris and Frankfurt and Copenhagen and Zürich and Rome that the jewellery-designing business was profitable. His father must also have been of what the English call 'good family', for David was enrolled at birth in an exclusive public school from which he was expelled at fourteen.

'And all because I had a streaming cold,' David reminisced.

He lay with his hands clasped behind his head; the dark stubble of beard seemed to accentuate the bone-structure of his face, and his eyes consulted first one and then the other of us, to make sure we were following what he told us.

'You must imagine an English public school of the better sort,' he instructed us. 'Lots of cold, grey, worn stone, just the thing in a cold climate to retain the damp and the chill. Draughty corridors, antique sanitary facilities, insufficiently heated rooms, constant coughing and a great deal of tradition and atmosphere which somehow wasn't very warming. I hated it. I sneezed my way through my education and so did most of my classmates. I had a small room to myself, which was unusual. Most rooms were shared, but this was a left-over little hole and it was furnished for me. The furniture was good but it, too, didn't do anything to warm me. The only place I was ever warm was in bed.

'Well, when that super-cold confined me to bed, I was delighted. I was brought my meals in bed, the infirmary was overcrowded with bronchial cases as always in mid-winter, and I had a fine holiday, reading and eating and blowing my nose and receiving afternoon-tea and evening

visitors. The matron always looked in on me at tea-time and usually brought me a special tit-bit; she was a kindly soul and insisted on treating me as a child. It's strange how reluctant adults are to have children grown up.'

Not, I thought, when there are lots of children. Then the sooner they grow up and can be useful, earn a few pennies hauling water and wood, or a wage as a tapper in the school holidays, or in the village, as shop-assistant, the better.

'The chambermaid caught a cold, too, whether from me or some other sniveller I don't know, but one morning, while all the others were attending classes, she came in to tidy up, pale and shivery and watery-eyed. She was a sweet girl, a country lass of sixteen or so much impressed with the importance of the young men she served, for she knew their titles and genealogies and was a firm believer that England's leaders were formed on cricket fields such as ours.'

David studied our faces; we were both leaning towards him, unconsciously intent.

'What would you do if you were warm and snug in bed and somebody else was cold?' he asked.

'Oh, David,' Mem Helena protested, half-laughing, 'surely you knew if ...'

'Surely I did,' he agreed. 'And I thought instead of this being purely a piece of academic information I had culled from older boys, I should take the opportunity of acquiring first-hand experience. So we both cuddled down in my bed with our clothes off and were very pleased with each other, except we had to keep blowing our noses all the time. Everything would have been fine except that was the one day the matron decided to give me a little extra attention and look in on me in the morning with a cup of hot broth, instead of at tea-time only. There was nothing for me to deny. The country maid was dismissed and got a job as waitress in the local tea-room, and I was expelled and finished my schooling in the States at a very acceptable university where I made all the right contacts and met

innumerable pretty girls who felt I, too, was "a right contact". But my reputation as a seducer had preceded me, you see, so I was very popular because of my English experience and very glamorous because of my expulsion from such a respected institute.'

'What did *you* find it like, David,' I asked, 'to be without parents?'

He frowned at that and nibbled at the grapes we had brought.

'It depends on the sort of parents you have,' he said thoughtfully. 'In my case there was little difference being with them or without them, because when they were alive I saw almost nothing of them so I didn't miss them when they were killed. A mercy, I suppose.'

'After the university,' Mem Helena took up, 'what did you do then?'

'Escaped,' David breathed with a triumphant look. 'Escaped into the beautiful wide, bad world, with a small fortune from my parents sensibly invested to provide me with a regular, if modest, income.'

'So you don't need to work?' Mem Helena asked, surprised. 'You're well off?'

'Financially, I don't need to work,' David corroborated, 'but morally or temperamentally, I do.'

'Where did you escape to?' I asked. I was thinking of my own escape into town from the kampong, and was curious for a clue as to *his* experiences.

'Into travel, which is what every young man who can afford to always does, no matter what century or what society he lives in, and travel inevitably got me caught up in war. I've fought on three continents already, never willingly, although I had the acumen to volunteer before I was commandeered.'

'If you'd come here a few years ago,' Mem Helena said reflectively, 'you'd have been fighting here, too. Against the terrorists, although this has never been a really bad area.'

'I've already had my fill of fighting in Asia,' David said

dryly, 'but now I think of it, the company *did* ask me when they hired me if I could handle weapons. I never gave the question much thought.' He lifted his shoulders in a gesture of dismissal. 'I thought they meant could I shoot marauding game. After all,' and he again looked from one to the other of us, 'each part of the world is busy with its own particular war, and your war was exclusively *your* problem. The terrorists were *here*, not elsewhere. I can assure you that in Korea and Kenya we didn't give a damn about your bandits, we had our own enemies.'

The next day David was out of bed, tottering about, and Mem Helena enjoyed pampering him. I think, in retrospect, that was the beginning of her love for him, although, of course, she thought she was being kindly and suitably concerned and doing what any woman would have done. I am certain David realized her attention to him wasn't as maternal as she supposed, but he was a patient as well as an experienced man, and he never hurried her along her inevitable road to him.

About this time the manager returned from leave, sicker than ever and more determined than ever to conceal it. Ah Fan was so upset at his fearful appearance that she nagged him into making a will, witnessed by two of her village cronies, in which she'd be well recompensed for the years she had spent with him. We all thought, looking at his grey face and the perpetual lines of pain around his eyes and mouth, that he had come back to the rubber estate to die.

We badly underestimated both his will-power and his avarice. He willed himself to live so that he could acquire (both by earning and certain other easier means) sufficient capital to retire on. He visualized his old age as a period in which he would sit with decorous importance on some London board, attend a solemn monthly meeting where his advice and recommendations would be respectfully listened to and followed, and the rest of the time frequent his favourite pubs throughout England and Scotland in a

new Bentley, tipping himself to death and pinching girls' bottoms and being a fine, jovial, popular fellow wherever he went. As an ambition I didn't think much of it, but he voiced it so loudly and so often to everyone he met, that the entire village and kampong, as well as the rubber estate, were as familiar with his future Bentley and his future philanderings as we were with our goats and chickens and ducks.

He wanted 'to hang on', as he phrased it, for another short tour of two years. It was customary for the senior men in the company to serve only a two-year tour; their healths, for the most part, couldn't have withstood a longer stretch. They had two weeks of vacation, local leave, each year which was supposed to keep them in condition. The younger men served a four-year contract, their salaries were too minuscule to permit local leave, and when their healths gave out as they grew older, they, too, were put on a two-year basis. I found this a policy for idiots, as it seemed to me more sensible to maintain a young man's health with short tours and short leaves instead of running him down. I wouldn't abuse our bullocks in a similar fashion, they would never then be a good investment.

Tuan Ian's case was even worse. Local leave was out of the question, but now he worked Saturdays and Sundays regularly, a seven-day week month in, month out. It was an arrangement that suited nobody save the manager, and he insisted on it.

At first Mem Helena was rueful about it. 'I'm a grass widow,' she said, 'Ian's having an affair with the estate.'

But as Tuan Ian couldn't change the situation, she continued to be left alone. Tuan Ian didn't like any of it, but he said – quite logically – it was only for a short period, just two years, and then, when they moved into the manager's bungalow they could begin normal balanced life with security and money and vacations. He was working now to cement the solidity of his family's future. It was a natural aim.

However, there was one factor working against him of

which Tuan Ian was entirely unaware. The rubber estate had no secrets from the village or the kampong (although the manager didn't know *that*), because the Chinese in the village used to take advantage of the cupidity and drunkenness of the manager's chief clerk, the one man besides Tuan Ian who knew everything about the estate. This chief clerk, Sanamayathan by name, was a loathsome man, a boaster, a coward, a petty despot and a prattler. There was nothing he wouldn't reveal under the influence of alcohol, and the Chinese plied him with whisky every few days. Anything the Chinese knew eventually seeped through to the kampong.

The chief clerk typed up the 'Private' and 'Confidential' letters for the manager, and as evidence of the speed with which the Chinese used to operate, as soon as the postmaster reported that such letters were in the post, the chief clerk was invited to the coffee-shop for dinner, a euphonious name for the whisky he drank, and the contents of the letters were known before they ever left the village.

In this way we all knew that complimentary as the manager was to Tuan Ian's face, he wrote regular letters to his company's agents complaining against Tuan Ian's inefficiency and stating that he was a man who needed a strong guiding hand (like the manager himself) behind him to produce good results, and that under no condition was he qualified to take over the management of the estate, as had been suitably demonstrated by the shambles he had made during the manager's leave. This was totally untrue, for the estate had never been more harmoniously run and with better reports on it by the visiting agents whose job it was to report on conditions. Still, the old man had a great deal of power, and there were few who wanted to argue with him and certainly nobody near retirement age, when bonuses were awarded according to the discretion of the board, where he had good personal connections.

The manager's position was obvious. If the company discovered that Tuan Ian could do as good a job as he, at

half his age and half his salary, there would be no reason to continue to employ him. He was protecting himself.

As the estate labour force was decidedly pro-Tuan Ian there was considerable indignation over this duplicity, but nobody had the courage to tell Tuan Ian what was happening, and the assistants, the only people he might have listened to, were also the only ones in an ignorance as complete as his own. Tuan Ian was so innately decent, that had an Asian dared insinuate the manager was double-crossing him, Tuan Ian most likely would have dismissed him as well as disbelieved him. Tuan Ian didn't know the meaning of disloyalty.

I didn't know what to do. If I told Mem Helena, she would have to tell Tuan Ian who her informant was and he would probably disbelieve me and deny me his hospitality. On the remote chance that he might believe me, he was the sort who would demand a show-down with the manager which, naturally, he would lose, for no company can take an assistant's word against a manager's and still retain the manager. When *he* lost, he would be sent elsewhere and *I* would lose Mem Helena and the life I had come to value. I kept silent, telling myself that estate matters were no concern of mine.

The manager was working Tuan Ian harder than ever, maintaining that his eyesight bothered him (this was true as was subsequently proved by a harrowing little incident), so all the checking of the combined paper work, estimates, accounts, figures was now done by Tuan Ian in the evenings at the bungalow. I knew the situation was explosive, but I hoped something would happen to alter it.

Since disagreeable things seem invariably to happen at the same time, this was the period when my sisters began to make fun of my western habits. They were, I think, bored with their own lives and envious of mine and frustrated, wanting to have all I had without leaving the kampong.

'I suppose,' one of them would say in an innocent tone,

'you'll soon be wanting foam-rubber mattresses to sleep on, like at the estate?'

'Don't be foolish,' I reprimanded patiently. 'Nobody save the manager has foam-rubber mattresses, they all have kapok, and older and thinner than anything we have. And the manager hates foam-rubber.'

'Then why doesn't he give his foam-rubber mattresses to somebody who likes them,' they asked me, 'and sleep on kapok if he wants to?'

'The mattresses are on the inventory, he can't just dispose of them,' I explained, 'and anyway, he's the manager. He has to have better things than his staff.'

This sent them off into hoots of laughter, and they went around quoting my words with relish as an example of how the orang-puteh thinks. A white man's thought process, they would tell their friends in the kampong, is determined by his position with regard to his fellow-man, and the higher up he is in his particular company and salary, the more he has to show it, even if he doesn't care to.

The truth was quite different. The manager *did* dislike foam-rubber, it was new-fangled, but Ah Fan loved it, so the whole bungalow, guestroom, lounge-suite and bedroom, had to have foam-rubber mattresses, pillows and cushions. Ah Fan was completely aware of what the manager should have, and it was, understandably, always something she wanted. It was a long way for Ah Fan to have come, from sleeping on the bare floor of a cubicle in a large, noisy, congested room divided into thirty or forty such sleeping holes – space enough to lie down in and store a cooking brazier – to sleeping in the manager's huge, ugly bedroom on modern sanitized brocade-covered foam-rubber. That mattress made her feel like a lady. It was a luxury Mem Helena didn't have.

Because the possibility of losing Mem Helena had cropped up – for surely finally somehow Tuan Ian would discover what the manager was doing to him – I was with her more than ever, clinging to the bungalow life and all it implied. Perhaps the closeness of my association with her,

my awareness of her, led me to discover – before she knew it herself – that she was very attached to David. I had a corroboration of sorts from David himself.

I brought David some durians from one of our kampong trees. Very few Europeans can stand the fruit, they maintain the smell puts them off, but David had a passion for them.

I bicycled to his bungalow with a basket of durians and, because I always add flowers to any gift I make, I had tied a big bouquet of purple-and-white orchids to my handlebars.

As I cycled up the driveway, I could hear his battery radio on at full blast, playing some sort of European music that I half-recognized and yet didn't actually know. When I entered the bungalow – for with that noise he couldn't hear me coming – I found him lying on the floor, which was anyway the most comfortable place, better than the uncertain chairs or settee, with a pillow under his head and one arm flung across his eyes.

Standing in the doorway with the durian basket at my feet and the orchids in my hands, I looked down at him and was conscious how handsomely masculine David was. His feet were crossed at the ankles, and his long body was flat and hard and muscular without being corded and knotted. He whistled along with the orchestra whenever the singing stopped and I just stood there and listened. I had heard that sort of music before on Mem Helena's radiogram. She had an enormous collection of records and was particularly fond of opera, which it took me a good deal of listening to enjoy.

At first I found operas pretty silly, and said so, the sopranos singing at the top of their lungs to violent puffed-up tenors, everything maudlin and ridiculous and thoroughly unlikable, and the mel-d's – arias, Mem Helena called them – although sometimes quite moving were, when translated to me, flowery and high-flown, to say the least.

Mem Helena explained to me that people who attended

opera performances didn't expect to see their daily life on the stage, they had enough of that at home. They expected a larger-than-life drama enhanced and emphasized by music, something exaggerated that would nevertheless be based on emotions and circumstances they were familiar with, like jealousy in Verdi's *Otello*, or desertion in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* or sex as in Bizet's *Carmen*. After I accepted this, Mem Helena showed me photographs of the stage sets and costumes, lavish creations I thought, and I read the librettos while I listened and tried to imagine the stage and the audiences Mem Helena described to me. It impressed me as a wonderful escape fairyland and I longed, one day, to see an opera performed.

Now I listened to what came over David's radio. I must have stood a few minutes before he became aware he was no longer alone. He moved his arm and turned his head just enough towards the doorway to find out who had intruded on him.

'Oh, it's you!' he said, and sat up, plumped the pillow he'd been using, patted it and invited me to come sit down. 'Listen to this!' he ordered, and held up a finger to admonish me to silence.

I left the durians inside the doorway and sat down beside him, holding my orchids. I had sprinkled water on them before setting out, and some drops still glistened on them. Turning my attention to the radio, I listened to a duet, soprano and tenor, and nodded sagely at David.

'Opera,' I identified. 'Mem Helena has lots of recordings.'

'She hasn't got this one,' he said decisively, 'and maybe she's wise not to.'

'Why?' I asked. David never rejected a forthright question. He always answered.

'Well, now, Zainah,' he said lazily, 'just by listening to it, what are these two singing about?'

'What the soprano and tenor always sing about in opera,' I said promptly, 'love.'

'What do you think of it?'

I listened and then said, 'I think it's very sad.' I wanted to be more specific because the music touched me, so I added, 'and noble.' It was in a language I couldn't identify.

He waited until the duet came to its close and then switched off the radio.

'It's about a man – the tenor, naturally – who has a best friend – a baritone, of course – with whose wife – the soprano – he's very much in love,' he said, taking the orchids from me and pouring water from a carafe into a vase and placing them into it. David wasn't stupid about flowers, he never made the male mistake of ramming them down into the nearest empty jar. He always fluffed them out, as it were, and made sure they were advantageously displayed. He used to say if they took the trouble to grow for him, he could take the trouble to arrange them. 'And the wife requites his love, but this is discovered by her husband at a masked ball which all three attend. What you just heard is where the wife reveals to the tenor that she reciprocates his feelings. It's all on a grand scale, of course, but then sometimes life itself reaches a grand scale.'

'It was very nice,' I said lamely. 'What was the wife's name?'

'Amelia, a candid personality. It's an Italian piece,' and then he changed the subject abruptly. 'The durians look wonderful, it was good of you to have brought them. And the orchids. Where shall I place them?'

'On the desk,' I directed, and he put them on a corner of it where they made a bright accent in the shoddy room.

There were, I'm sure, other indications, but I missed them. Then, one Sunday, Mem Helena planned a picnic for us – for Tuan Ian, David and me, saying we needed a break from the estate. At the last minute, just as we were setting out in the car, with the hamper loaded away and a shaker of cocktails and a Thermos of hot coffee, Ian was summoned by phone to the manager's bungalow on estate business and told us he most likely wouldn't be able to join us, to go ahead with the picnic, there was no use us

three also being deprived of it, and to tell him about it in the evening.

Sometimes the most innocent phrase becomes, through circumstances, heavy with meaning. As it happened, the one thing none of us could do was to tell Tuan Ian the truth about the picnic. Mem Helena and David simply because it was impossible, and I because I was pretending I had observed nothing, noticed nothing, surmised nothing. But that picnic was the turning point.

When we reported it to Tuan Ian, we said – quite truthfully – that the weather had been magnificent, not too hot and with a fine sea breeze blowing. The British, I've noticed, always seem to think themselves fully informed about an event if they know what the weather was like.

The beach we chose wasn't a popular one; there were no inns with juke-boxes, no soft-drink pedlars and candy-vendors. At one end a private bungalow hired out canoes and small sailboats, but the whole fleet comprised merely a half-dozen craft, so it was a case of first come, first served. From our end of the beach I could just make out, peeking over the point of the crescent, the tip of the third islet of Sang Lee's 'marble mausoleum'.

We parked the car in the shade. We were far from the main road, as our beach could be reached only by an ill-defined dirt turn-off visible to the discerning eye of the knowledgeable. The tide was coming in and, except for guests down by the distant bungalow, the spacious, curved beach was deserted. We spread our mats on the sand under a cluster of causerina trees and, although we didn't really need it, planted our umbrella at a rakish angle.

Water has a hypnotic effect on me. I find myself watching the waves with a blank mind and utter absorption, and now I sat with my knees under my chin and looked out over the sparkling sunlight on the softly undulating water. We wore swim-suits under our clothes, and now we undressed and sunbathed, or rather Mem Helena and David lay in the sun and I kept to the shade.

The morning passed pleasantly, we splashed about in

the clear water, swam and floated. Mem Helena had brought a snorkel and we took turns paddling face-down, looking at the sand ripples and shells. Except for walking, none of us got any exercise, as the rubber estate provided no sport facilities. We were hungry from the unusual exertion and decided on an early lunch. Mem Helena and David drank cocktails and beer that was still chilled, while I drank fruit-juice. We ate huge portions of galantine of chicken, and rolls and cheese and fruit and coffee piping hot from the Thermos. The food and the exercise made me drowsy, and when David said he was off to the bungalow to hire a sailboat for the afternoon, I turned over on my side and that was the last I knew until some hours later.

I was alone when I awoke. The beach had widened as the tide receded and gently rocking out on the glimmering water was a small, lone sailboat, a sort of flat-bottomed rowboat with a triangle of canvas. I amused myself by wading, then swimming, and, back on the beach, drying myself. I nibbled at cheese and grapes and chocolates. Changing into my clothes, I lay back and once again dozed off.

Although I heard their voices, I was in that half-dream state when it's an effort to wake up, the eyelids are heavy and one feels weighted and inert. I felt them standing over me and then Mem Helena said, 'It's all the exercise and the food, and she's been swimming again, her suit's wet. She's dead beat.'

'We needn't go yet,' David answered. 'We have another hour before the sun sets. Maybe this time we'll see the green flash.'

They moved off. I heard the rustle of a mat being dragged along the sand, but the air was so still that, since they remained quite near, I overheard all they said. Perhaps I should have shown I was awake as soon as the talk became revealing, but by then I would already have heard too much, so I simply remained where I was, unmoving and aware.

'But, Helena,' David said, obviously resuming an

interrupted thought, 'you're confusing gratitude with love.'

'Sometimes they become indistinguishable.' Mem Helena sounded troubled. 'And I don't want to confuse love with lust.'

'Passion isn't lust, and what has happened between us this afternoon should convince you ...'

'I don't need convincing,' Mem Helena broke in, almost wearily, 'I've known for a long time. I just didn't want to admit it.'

There was a pause and then David said, in a different tone of voice, a reasoning, practical tone: 'Of course I'll never be the planter Ian is, he has a genius for it. Nor could I hope to earn Ian's salary or bonus for several years to come. But if it's the planting life you want, I could still get by and we could live as comfortably as you are now off my private income.'

'It's madness, David,' Mem Helena said. 'We're not cut out for the same sort of life. That's our tragedy. At heart, you want to roam the world, and at heart I'm a stay-at-home, and if we go against our natures we'll wind up hating each other. I'd know you're a planter for my sake and that you're not fulfilling yourself, and that would make me wretched. And if we travelled about, perching here for a year, there for two years, as your fancy dictates, you'd know I'm miserable because I hate an unsettled life.'

'Which is more important, Helena, to be together or to lead a certain kind of life?' David asked.

'As I feel now,' Mem Helena answered in a strained voice, 'to be together. But as we'll *both* feel later on, to lead a certain kind of life.'

'Shouldn't we let the future take care of itself?' David suggested.

'The future can't! *We* make our own futures. Our future grows out of our present!' Mem Helena protested.

'I'm perfectly willing to live any sort of life you want,' David offered. 'The important thing is to be together. I'm an adaptable sort and I have no particular talent, so it

doesn't matter to me if I'm a rubber planter or an electric appliances salesman or a ship's steward.'

'Will you say that ten years from now, when you're bored to death with your job because it's leading nowhere?'

'I can never be bored to death if we're together,' David said positively. 'Now, for God's sake, Helena,' and his tone sharpened, 'be realistic. There is nothing calamitous or scandalous about divorce.' There was a long silence and I imagine that Mem Helena was shaking her head. She was old-fashioned enough to feel that a marriage was undertaken as her vow indicated, until death does part. 'It is my dearest wish,' David said slowly, 'that you bear my child. I want a child by you.' He paused and then went on, 'And you wanted my child, out there in the boat. I felt it. That's true, isn't it?'

'That's true,' Mem Helena replied after a time, in a low voice, and then cried out, 'but I can't leave him *now*. That would be rank desertion, unforgiveable. He's working so hard for an established future! If I leave, I'm pulling the foundation from beneath his feet!'

'If you don't leave now,' David said urgently, 'you won't have the courage to later.'

'I haven't the courage to now,' Mem Helena returned.

Again there was a long pause and then David said, 'When you love me enough, you'll come to me. I shall be there, waiting.'

THREE

I DON'T understand why it is, but it seems to be quite all right, even admirable, for a man to be in love with a woman and make it perfectly clear, yet all wrong for a woman to be in love with a man and behave likewise. David made no secret of his feelings for Mem Helena, but except him and her – and, unknown to them, myself – nobody knew that Mem Helena returned his love. She never once gave herself away in public, she played to perfection the rôle of the beautiful woman accustomed to admirers; nor did she betray herself before me, either when the three of us were together or when she was alone with me. In the two or three months that followed the picnic I began to wonder if perhaps I hadn't dreamed it all.

Then, one day at the bungalow when I was helping Mem Helena polish her collection of local weapons, krisses and parangs and even a Kelantan hatchet, she told me she was pregnant, and when she was expecting her baby. I realized, from the dates, that this child could be David's.

The scene is as clear in my mind as it was then. I was holding the hatchet when she told me. I had never before touched this particular weapon or seen it, it isn't used in our part of the country and is anyway forbidden by law, but the Kelantan men on the east coast all wear it openly, tucked into their sarongs. It looks like a toy, a miniature hatchet with a silky smooth curved wooden handle that snuggles into the palm of the hand, and a gleaming sharp blade. No strength is needed to kill a man with this, a quick, simple flick of the wrist over a man's head, and the toy-hatchet has split his skull. A child could murder with it. I was fascinated by it and I remember turning it over and over in my hands while I figured out the date we'd been at the beach and the date Mem Helena said she expected her baby. Pregnancies are never exact, of course,

but she gave herself away by naming the day she expected the baby to be born.

When Mem Helena began to show her pregnancy, Tuan Ian asked me to be a companion to her, to see to it she didn't strain herself or overdo things and to take care of her. If anything went wrong with her, it was not only his responsibility, but any physical illness or accident she underwent must be paid for out of his own pocket by him as the company made no medical provisions whatsoever for the wives of their European staff in the jungle, far removed from the care of a town hospital or doctor.

He insisted on paying me a monthly wage for this, for Tuan Ian was always meticulous and just about such matters. Aside from the job I had held in town, this was the first regular paying job I had, and having a settled monthly income of my own (that I didn't really need) gave me a fine feeling of wealth. I had plenty of clothes, both Malay and western, and jewellery, and I let my sisters borrow my finery freely. Tuan Ian opened a savings account for me in a bank in town. And the Imam, seeing me with my gold ear-rings and bangles and necklaces, said I was walking proof that a virtuous girl could earn even greater rewards than the best-paid prostitute. I was relieved by his remark, for that meant that my town escapades still hadn't reached the kampong, and if they hadn't by now, they certainly never would, so my reputation was safe.

Looking back, I can see that if I hadn't taken the town job and met Virginia, none of the rest of it would have happened. But, as David says, hindsight is cheap, everybody has it.

In the months of Mem Helena's pregnancy, I shed the kampong entirely. I still preferred Malay dress as I felt it suited me better, but by now I was equally at home in western dresses. I never learned to like the pink gins and whiskies that are such a routine in western households and continued to drink orange-juice by preference, although I

sometimes pretended it was spiked with gin. I was at home at least once every day, but often only for a few moments, popping in and out. The kampong, in turn, omitted me from its life. Since I held a respectable paying job I had, in a sense, made good, and it was accepted that most of my time would be given to my job.

When I recollect all the fuss and commotion that accompanied the manager's Mem's packing years ago when she went back to Scotland, I am amazed at what inconvenient trifles western women accumulate. All my belongings – and for a kampong girl I had an unheard-of quantity – could be packed in a large sarong and slung over my shoulder, and weighed less than twenty pounds. The manager's Mem had a steel trunk and three large suitcases and a hat-box and shoe-box, and the total weight was over three hundred pounds. Moving about is so cumbersome for a westerner and so simple for us.

My moving into Mem Helena's bungalow was unobtrusive. I left no tell-tale possessions or knick-knacks about, all I had was a drawer in the bureau of her little boy's room and I slept on the spare bed in his room. He was as used to me as he was to the wee black dogs who spent the night at the foot of his bed, on their backs, with their paws extended lazily to the cooling night air.

Sometimes events are like an aeroplane. They start slowly, then lift and then soar along at terrific speed, and that's what happened in the next months.

· It's clear to me now that Mem Helena must have given David a definite 'no' to his proposal of marriage and that's what led him to Yoke Chan. He used her to 'get over' Mem Helena, or at least to try to. It was probably the most normal thing to do. Mem Helena knew about her, indeed we all did. Yoke Chan is – as I've already indicated – a very public sort of person. Just at this time, Ken Livermore arrived on the estate in the usual merry-go-round of new junior assistants. I suppose David lasted so long because he worked entirely with Tuan Ian and the manager forgot about him.

David often said that all climacteric events in life are minor Greek dramas. If you examine them, you can see the inevitable steps that provoked them. He was a great believer in what he called 'hubris'.

Like everyone else, ever since my stay in town and my association with David, I had seen Yoke Chan about, and whatever she was doing she was being conspicuous about it. Possibly she'd had her eye on David for a long time. Certainly she was on the spot when he needed her, although he didn't know it would be she who would be fulfilling the bill, as it were.

At that time, Yoke Chan's picture was appearing rather more frequently on magazine-covers, and she did a great deal of modelling throughout the country. She was our highest-paid model and the most in demand. Her openly admitted aim was to reach the screen, to attract the attention of a producer or, alternately, to marry an Englishman who would bring her to the J. Arthur Rank people, or an American who would facilitate Hollywood to her.

The Yoke Chan story begins the evening David and Ken took me along on one of their 'beat-ups', as they phrased their patronage of the town's bars. That was when David swam into Yoke Chan's calculated grasp.

A word about Ken as he was at that time, a happy-go-lucky type, new to the country, new to rubber-planting and an old hand at imbibing great quantities of beer. Everybody who met him liked him (except the manager, who never really liked anybody except himself), he was so carefree and easy-going, adaptable and obliging, ready with an amusing story, willing to join in on anything. Tall and thin, with a prominent beaked nose, a crew cut and a winning smile, Ken was the light-hearted fillip that lifted the rubber estate life out of a routine groove. That he was so completely self-centred as to be thoroughly irresponsible was a trait of character we all recognized, like being a congenital liar or a kleptomaniac. We forgave him for it and never relied on him. That much was clear to us after his first month on the estate.

I had been taken along on the 'beat-up' as a safeguard. I was to keep them from getting too drunk to drive back to the estate, and I was to see to it that they didn't fall in with harlots. My rôle was like that of a nanny supervising two little boys on an excursion.

We did the rounds of the lesser bars and then went to the hotel where a group of rowdy senior planters were clustered around the bar, and in their midst, perched on a bar-stool, with two braids hanging down to her waist on either side of her face, Yoke Chan was dispensing smiles and flirtatious glances. I saw her first, and then Ken found her and stopped dead so that David, behind him, bumped into him.

'Smashing bit of skirt, that,' Ken said enthusiastically, assessing her profession correctly at once. 'Why do all those old buggers interest her?'

'Because they have money,' I said tartly, and led the way to a table.

In theory, ladies did not sit at the bar. We placed our chairs in such a way, however, that we had a good view of the bar and all that happened there. I was glad the military weren't in that evening, then a nasty scramble for Yoke Chan's favours might easily have begun.

That night she wore a wine-red chongsam bordered in white piqué, and white frangi-pani blossoms were pinned behind her ears. She knew me, of course, from my months in town, although we'd never spoken together. In my way I dare say I was as conspicuous as she, for I wore Malay dress (both David and Ken preferred me in it) and was the only woman so attired in the bar. Yoke Chan looked briefly at Ken who, for all his worldly experience, was gaping at her like a fish out of water, and then examined David.

By 'examined', I mean she slowly looked him up and down, all the while conversing with the men around her, and when she had finished her scrutiny she looked directly at me and smiled and waved. I knew then that she had come to a conclusion about David and would soon be join-

ing our table after she'd guided the senior planters to their Jaguars and Daimlers and Mercédès.

'I say, do *you* know her?' Ken asked, his eyes snapping in excitement.

'Her name is Yoke Chan,' I told him, 'and she'll soon be joining us.'

'What luck!' Ken exulted, and I felt obliged to add, 'She is coming because of David.'

'Because of me?' David asked, surprised, and looked over at her. 'Why me?'

'Oh, David,' I protested, 'if you were a young woman like Yoke Chan with lots of money, wouldn't you prefer you to those pot-bellies?'

'I say,' Ken spoke up admiringly, 'you do speak a jolly idiomatic English.'

'Why shouldn't I?' I retorted crossly. 'I've been speaking it all my adult life!'

'Listen,' Ken said anxiously, paying no attention to me, 'if that number comes over here, I don't want to be drunk. Can one order some sobering sandwiches?'

He ate a plateful of sardine sandwiches, during which time Yoke Chan negotiated her elderly brood to the door. Ken was avid to meet her, and David mildly curious. She disappeared outside and we heard the roar of the cars being driven away. When she returned, she came directly to our table, exactly as if she had an appointment with us. It was her way of doing things and it had style and confidence.

Although I felt no good would come of an association with Yoke Chan, I had to introduce her. I wondered, as David pulled out a chair for her, if perhaps just for these moments his mind could be free of preoccupation with Mem Helena.

There was the usual babble of small talk, the exchange of names and questions about the work and the estate.

'I know your estate well,' Yoke Chan said, dimpling at David. 'I used to stop off there on my way south.' When was that, I wondered. How many years ago? 'Next time,

I'll drop in and call on you. What bungalow did you say you were in?'

David hadn't said and certainly realized it, but he was polite.

'In the Number Three Division one.'

He thought this was just chit-chat, but I knew she would visit him, and by the time she turned up she would have a complete dossier on him. She would know him to be unmarried, to have a private income, and to be romantically unattached to anyone available.

'Do you have a car?' Ken asked, impressed. He loved cars and had none, using the old estate Land-Rover for any trip off the estate, which was tantamount to taking his life in his hands as sometimes the brakes failed. Once, through sheer neglect, the steering had failed. It was a treat for him to come to town in David's speedy little MG, even if he had to have me on his lap, which he pretended to enjoy but which is hardly comfortable.

'Oh, yes, I have a car,' Yoke Chan said, speaking to David. 'A very popular model. Its twin is parked outside, as a matter of fact, except mine's blue and the twin is scarlet.'

'That will be mine, I expect,' David said negligently, and I was certain Yoke Chan knew that already.

'So we have similar tastes!' Yoke Chan observed, and lowered her lashes discreetly in modest invitation. Then she chatted politely to Ken while David ordered a round of drinks, and then turned to me to ask where I was living.

I understood she wanted to make sure I wasn't David's keep, and I told her I was working at Mem Helena's bungalow and this was my night off.

Two days later I received a package addressed to me, care of Mem Helena, and I knew, before opening it, that – in her way – Yoke Chan was repaying me for the introduction I had performed.

'Open it!' Mem Helena urged. 'Unexpected parcels are such fun!'

We were on the veranda, Mem Helena propped on the

settee with cushions behind her back and sandals on her feet. Her ankles had begun to swell and the baby was low down on her body, a boy she predicted, otherwise there was no change in her appearance.

It would be jewellery, I was certain, and as I undid the wrapping I rehearsed what I would tell Mem Helena about the Yoke Chan incident. Yoke Chan's taste was exquisite. She had sent me a jade and gold link bracelet, and from the costliness of the gift I understood the importance of the service I had rendered her. For her own purposes, she wanted David, and I thought possibly in desperation he might accept her advances and try to substitute her for Mem Helena.

'It's lovely,' Mem Helena murmured absently; 'matched jade links.'

She asked no questions, but even so I told her exactly what the gift implied. She nodded and then said earnestly, almost prayerfully, 'Yes, David must be diverted. *He must be*. Perhaps this Yoke Chan can do it,' but she sounded sad as she said it.

Yoke Chan's blue car became quite a familiar sight and sound – for it had a loud engine that always announced its arrival; Yoke Chan wanted people to know what she was doing – on the rubber estate. She visited David every Sunday and then every week-end, spending first Saturday night at his bungalow and then Friday and Sunday nights as well. There were no secrets from the Special Constabulary posted at David's bungalow, and Fatimah was delighted to regale me with David's amorous doings. I even learned that Yoke Chan kept some spare clothes in his wardrobe, and often brought Chinese delicacies to eat.

On Saturday mornings, while David worked, she lay abed and manicured her nails or sewed; she was an expert needlewoman, as most Chinese are. But as she and David always spoke English, my faithful recorder, Fatimah, could tell me nothing of what they said. She understood not a word.

Often I was with Mem Helena when we heard Yoke

Chan's car roar into the estate, hurtle past along the road at the foot of the hill and growl on to David's. Even the manager noticed her conspicuous comings and goings, but as she always gave him a dazzling smile and a provocative wave of her hand, he merely commented that David had found himself a good-looking popsie. He hoped she wasn't costing him too much, and if only he himself were a bit younger . . . he never finished such sentences.

It was during this time (Yoke Chan lasted three months) that Ken Livermore was instructed by the manager to learn Tamil. It was an order out of the blue, supposedly relayed from the company itself and nobody could foresee the disastrous result it would have. Ken arrived at Mem Helena's as usual for the sunset punch – at which David no longer appeared – puzzled and, as always, joking.

'For God's sake, Ian,' he complained, 'all the workers I deal with on this estate are *Chinese!* I'm trying to gabble a few phrases of Hokkien at them, cute little weeders. You should see the way they waggle their bottoms at me. I've got to understand them, I know they're passing indecent comments about me. What's the point of *me* learning *Tamil?*'

The estate was running short-handed of junior assistants at the time. Young men, fresh out from England to learn about rubber planting on a minuscule salary and with no assured future in view of Malaya's imminent independence, were becoming hard to find. It was a foregone conclusion that Asians would replace Europeans in as many positions as possible, and for less pay. This applied to the planting industry, too. Few young men cared to risk four years learning a profession which there was no guarantee they would be allowed to continue to practise.

That particular evening, with David absent, only Ken and another boy – Hammond was his name – almost as green as he and who had unfortunately already got into the manager's black books and couldn't be expected to last long, sat with Mem Helena, Tuan Ian and myself and looked seawards at the sun. I had, by this time, come to

find the evening drink and sunset-watch a normal occurrence.

'Some day you might have an *Indian* labour force,' Tuan Ian said placatingly, fishing ice out of the bucket with tongs. 'Most of the tapping on European-owned estates is done by Tamils, you know. You'll want to speak to them.'

'Hell,' Ken said, practical-minded, 'they speak Malay, that's the coming official language of the country, and I can make myself understood in that! Personally, I'd rather learn Chinese, it'll be more useful out here. And almost half the country's population is Chinese.' He frowned thoughtfully and added, 'They control things, wherever you look'

'Many of the older Tamils don't speak Malay,' Tuan Ian said patiently.

'They'll soon be too old to work anyway,' Ken pointed out. 'All the younger generation is being taught Malay *and* English in the schools. So what's the point? I can see it might have been a convenience, even a necessity, to know Tamil thirty years ago, but let's move with the times! It isn't necessary today and Tamil is a pretty esoteric language to know. I mean it's neither a commercial language nor the second language of the country!'

Tuan Ian shrugged in that weary gesture of his when he was faced with logic that he agreed with, and yet had to carry out a superior's contradictory order.

'Company policy,' he said. 'They employ you, you may as well oblige.'

'Yes, but look here!' Ken said hotly, standing up and gesticulating with his glass. 'I can't seriously be expected to sit down at night and *study* when I've spent since half-past five in the morning at work, physical work much of it, and in the broiling sun of that new clearing. I'm no weakling, but at nine o'clock I'm bushed, I'm out. That's the sort of craziness a Chinese will do, and I'm no Chinese! And, come to think of it, I don't know any Chinese who *do* speak Tamil.'

'Ken,' Tuan Ian said sympathetically while young Hammond looked on, pop-eyed, 'why don't you do it the way it was done thirty years ago?' He sounded conciliatory and amused.

'How was that?' Ken stood stock still, expectant, like a puppy.

'Take a Tamil keep.'

'I can't afford one!' Ken protested. 'I pay my cook ...'

'Exactly,' Mem Helena cut in crisply. 'Stop paying your cook. A Tamil keep will cost you less and a woman will take better care of you than a man.'

'You mean,' Ken said incredulously, setting down his glass slowly, 'you mean, just go *shopping* for a woman?'

That was how Mariammah came to the estate. I don't know how he found her, those things go from one recommendation to another through a whole chain of people, but he went to fetch her from fifty miles away in the Land-Rover, paid five hundred dollars for her to a crone who claimed to be an aunt, and was in possession of her, and brought her back to teach him Tamil and cook and sew and clean and sleep with him. He borrowed a hundred and fifty dollars from David and another hundred and fifty from Mem Helena for her, and Mem Helena asked me for the love of God to go see the child when he brought her to his bungalow. She was only fifteen.

Ken's bungalow, although not as dilapidated as David's, had a less favourable location, a tiny garden and no aromatic frangi-pani tree. It lay, foolishly enough, in a hollow that retained the day's heat and was so damp at nights that the mosquitoes were unbearable and, although the place had at one time been screened, it was so old that insects crept through the crevices of the walls and the holes in the roof. Inside, it was white-washed, and the standard set of furniture, settee, four armchairs, tea-table and pahit tables, stood scattered in an irregular circle in an overlarge lounge that opened into a dining area, separated from it by a chin-high bookcase that some enterprising former tenant had painted Chinese red.

I found Mariammah in the kitchen shed, sitting on an up-ended beer-crate by the kitchen table, her head in her arms, sobbing quietly, and Ken nowhere about. She was thoroughly frightened, bewildered and nervously exhausted. I spoke to her several times before I could get her to raise her head, and then I saw a pretty round black face with deep black eyes and a shapely little nose and a truly lovely mouth. Her hair was braided and looped behind, parted in the centre, and oiled, and she wore a bright yellow sari stamped with a scarlet border and a short-sleeved white cotton blouse, neatly collared at the neck in the Chinese style, an unusual touch for an Indian.

'Shall I show you around the bungalow?' I asked her in Malay, and finally with a last few gulping sobs, she nodded at me, not speaking.

I remember how confused I had been years ago when the manager's Mem first had me brought to the big bungalow and taught me all the complex ways of the European. I tried to make things simple for Mariammah. She understood she was to wash and clean and mend, but she had no idea how to cook for a European. She was accustomed to eating her spiced rice with her fingers and now, from one day to another, she was expected to do everything differently.

'When you're not busy, or when you're sewing and mending,' I told her, 'you may sit here in the lounge. See, there is even a radio to play. And this is where you eat,' I took her by the hand and indicated the table. 'Shall I set the table the European way so that in the future you'll know how to do it without help?'

I thought if I could busy her she would forget her fears and overcome her homesickness for whatever hovel was familiar to her in whatever slum Ken had found her.

'For the morning meal,' I said, laying out place mats and cutlery, 'you put a cup and saucer here, and for the evening meal, a glass. In the morning, you cut a papaya in half and take out the seeds and put it on a plate.' I saw her eyes widen and shrugged. 'That's the way the European

eats it,' I explained, 'with a spoon.' I saw she doubted me. 'You'll see for yourself,' I assured her, and her face cleared. She had been afraid I might be making fun of her. 'Then these,' I showed her the packet of cornflakes and put one between her lips so she could taste it, 'you shake into a bowl and leave milk and sugar beside it. Can you fry eggs?'

She nodded, her great eyes flickering about the room.

'Fry two, and make some toast.' Again she looked askance at me. 'Brown some bread over the fire,' I clarified, 'two slices. And make some strong coffee. There, that's not difficult to remember, is it?' I wanted to sound encouraging.

'How often does this white man eat?' Mariammah asked timidly.

'A big breakfast around half-past ten, and then sandwiches and a pot of tea around three, and again a big meal at night, soup and meat or fowl or fish and potatoes or rice and a vegetable.'

'Will he expect me to cook beef?' Mariammah asked.

'No,' I said, bearing in mind that beef was expensive and Ken's budget small. 'He likes pork.'

Her eyes widened at me and I felt obliged to add, 'One tolerates in others things one wouldn't do one's self.'

I showed her the bedroom she was to share, and knew from her curious look at the beds that she had never before slept in one, let alone made one up, so I showed her where Ken kept his sheets and pillowcases – the bungalow was so bare that nothing was hard to find – and how to spread the sheet and plump the pillows and fold the blanket. I also showed her the bathroom, and she clapped her hands in delight at its poor appointments. It was the running water for the shower and the lavatory that so pleased her.

Ken found us having coffee together in the kitchen shed. The gardener assigned to the bungalow was also a Tamil and a willing old man, eager to help the young girl. It was his duty to chop the wood, stack it, light the stove at five in the morning for Ken's pre-muster cup of hot tea, wash

down the tough cement floors and, if possible, grow fruit and vegetables. The Special Constabulary were lodged only a short distance from this particular bungalow, three youths and their fragile-looking dainty child-wives, and I knew that Mariammah would soon get to know them.

‘I’m showing her around,’ I explained to Ken.

‘That’s very nice of you, ducks,’ he said, staring at Mariammah. ‘Will you stay to dinner and show her how to cook?’ he invited.

‘Mem Helena asked me to come here,’ I went on, by way of clarification.

‘Well, suppose I give Helena a ring and say you’re helping me out with my dinner?’ he suggested, finally looking at me. ‘And, Zainah,’ he said, smacking his hand to his forehead, ‘what the hell do I *talk* to her in?’ He looked back at Mariammah who was fascinated by his antics. ‘I don’t know more than two dozen household words in Malay and none of them consecutive!’

‘There’s always sign language,’ I reminded him, ‘and this way you’ll *have* to learn Tamil or not speak, and you couldn’t keep quiet for any length of time.’

He shook his head, unconvinced, and said, ‘I better have a drink. Imagine buying an unknown girl and suddenly setting up house with her. Great God.’ He sounded awed.

‘She feels as strange about it as you do,’ I assured him.

‘Yes, poor thing. Damn it, Zainah, I didn’t know she was only fifteen. You can’t deflower fifteen-year-olds,’ he protested.

‘In India,’ I said, quoting Tuan Ian, ‘the girls are mothers by that time.’

‘Yes,’ he muttered, ‘but I’m not Indian.’

Mariammah was an intelligent creature, she thought the table settings and cutlery and endless washing-up absurd – her plantain leaf was so much simpler and prettier – but she learned it at once, even to folding the cotton napkins into bishops’ hats. That evening we had soup out of a tin, and she imitated us and ate it with a spoon (although it

certainly would have been more sensible to drink it), and a flat fish from the river that the old gardener had brought in the morning, fried in oil with breadcrumbs and which Mariammah ate with her fingers – the fork and knife were beyond her – and cabbage which she spooned, and fried egg plant which she picked up daintily and nibbled at. For dessert there was left-over apple-sauce which I put into Ken's stemmed champagne glasses and then I prepared the coffee tray.

When I helped her wash-up in the kitchen, she asked incredulously, 'Does he eat with all that ceremony *every* night? Or was tonight special?'

I had felt the same way when first I saw the array of plates and silver and linen and glassware on a white man's table. I told her Ken was eating very simply, nothing like what a festive white man's dinner can be.

'I'll run you home in the Land-Rover,' Ken offered. 'Where are you staying, at Helena's or the kampong?'

Unwittingly, he showed me clearly by his innocent question how divided my life had become. Although the kampong was my home I lived at the bungalow. I gave as an excuse to myself that Mem Helena's baby was due in a few weeks.

Ken reported gleefully on Mariammah at sunset the next evening. She had done magnificently well, her only breakfast mistake had been trying to put the fried eggs on top of his cornflakes, and the snack lunch had been very tasty and her coffee good and strong. She shopped in the local Tamil lines' site store far more economically than his cook had – she wasn't taking the proverbial cook's percentage – and she washed and ironed like a dream. The only trouble was, she seemed to be learning English faster than he was learning Tamil, she already had picked up 'tea', 'coffee', 'butter', 'bread', 'eggs' and 'cornflakes'.

When he left for dinner, which he had promised Mariammah to help prepare, Mem Helena said, 'Well, that's turned out successfully It's a game to him, he's playing house.'

Just at that moment we heard the distant roar of Yoke Chan's M.G. and we fell silent, listening to it turn into the estate and race past up to David's bungalow.

'Well,' Tuan Ian remarked, 'it's a game to him, too,' and he waved with his pipe towards David's place. 'Except it isn't called house.'

It would be natural to assume that David should be the one who was happy with the glamorous Yoke Chan behaving as his keep and Ken should be miserable with an ignorant Tamil virgin as his, but it was the other way round. Ken and Mariammah sat over their meals teaching each other 'milk' and 'sugar' and 'table' and 'chair' in their native languages and both made about the same progress. Ken's diet began to consist of Indian dishes, chapatis and curries and vegetables foreign to him. David, on the other hand, just dropped away from us, seeing Tuan Ian only at work and never frequenting the coffee-shop. Tuan Ian said it was only normal that he should have an intense affair but he wished to God David would look as if he were enjoying it, instead of which David looked tired and glum.

'That morsel would tire *me* out,' Ken declared, 'and how I'd love it.'

Because Ken had met me through David, Mem Helena and Tuan Ian, and because I had befriended Mariammah, he asked me around to his bungalow rather frequently. We taught Mariammah snap and triple solitaire and I grew to feel towards her like a younger sister, a gayler, sweeter girl than my own sisters. Sistership, Ken said often, was what most seemed to reign in his bungalow because *he* felt towards *me* as he would to his own kid sister.

About a fortnight before Mem Helena's confinement, we noticed that Yoke Chan wasn't visiting David any more. We had grown so accustomed to the roar of her motor that now we missed it, and then David joined us again, re-appearing on Mem Helena's terrace for sunset as if he'd never been absent. He looked grim and withdrawn. We all made an effort to be especially nice to him and nobody

alluded to Yoke Chan. He stayed on to dinner, as if unable to tear himself away now that he'd returned to us.

It was the next day I came across them, Mem Helena and David, in the hilltop church, or rather both Mariammah and I.

Mariammah had been most casually exposed to religion. The crone who looked after her had sent her to work as a child as a kitchenmaid in a Tamil eating-house and, as people eat seven days a week, she worked seven days a week which left no time for schooling. With the crone, she visited the nearest temple on the big feast days, not to observe or participate, but to beg. There was always something to be had free, small coins and food and fruit.

Because Mariammah was essentially a shy girl, the estate temples and their gossipy atmosphere frightened her. The estate temples functioned in multiple capacity – as temples, at all times as a club and meeting place, as a house and as a restaurant for entertaining the management on holidays, when a table was set up inside them, a curry served and endless bottles of whisky and beer wedged between the paws of the painted clay animals and the legs of the gods where they wouldn't get broken during the festivities and still be readily available as needed.

Mariammah asked me if I didn't know of a quiet and secluded place on the estate where she could go 'to think' and wouldn't be in anybody's way. I suspected she was falling in love with Ken and wanted somewhere to day-dream unmolested, so I suggested the Catholic church, about which she knew nothing at all. I wasn't convinced about the wisdom of showing her a bleeding Jesus, but the view and the isolation might compensate for the distressing statue and pictures. We took the short-cut through the rubber from Ken's bungalow, climbed the hill and approached the church by the side under the jacaranda tree.

We were puffing from the climb and weren't talking, which is why we heard Mem Helena and David and they were unaware of us. Mariammah clutched my hand and

we stood quietly under the tree, embarrassed at stumbling across them, anxious not to be discovered and upset them, and thoroughly uncomfortable. Mariammah looked at me with her eyes stretched their widest, and I knew I would have to explain what a married European woman in her ninth month of pregnancy was doing on a secluded hilltop with a bachelor.

They sat side by side on a fallen tree trunk and David held Mem Helena's hands between his.

'It was a waste of time,' he was saying. 'I couldn't forget and I didn't enjoy.'

'Perhaps she wasn't the right woman for you,' Mem Helena replied.

'Of course she wasn't,' he agreed. 'We both knew that.'

'I mean,' Mem Helena corrected hastily, 'the right *type* of woman.'

'For God's sake!' David burst out. 'If a beauty queen with both intelligence and experience can't distract me, what type,' and he emphasized the word derisively, 'what *type* possibly could?'

'Oh, David, you have to *want* distraction. You fought against it.'

'I suppose I was keeping faith, in my way,' he said quietly.

Down below on the road a lorry passed by and I took advantage of the noise to pull Mariammah with me downhill and out of sight and hearing. I told her, when she asked me – as I knew she would – that Mem Helena and David were old friends and they had been talking about the past. That was strictly true.

Mem Helena's baby was another boy. It would be foolish to say he resembled David. He was just a wrinkled, red baby who smoothed out and cried for milk and lay on his back in the bamboo crib kicking his feet at the glinting plastic collation that dangled above his head. I am certain that David thought he was behaving discreetly, but he was at Mem Helena's bungalow every moment possible,

playing endlessly with the baby, holding it as it slept, or just watching it. Tuan Ian was touched at his devotion and insisted he be godfather. It was christened Cornelius after Mem Helena's father but we all called it 'Niel'.

This is when things began to happen quickly until, at the end, everything was happening at once. Shortly after Mem Helena's baby was born we celebrated our Merdeka, our independence. It was at that time that this new police station where I now sit was built, as well as a new post office with a furnished writing-room. I gave plants to both places.

A country's independence should be a big event, and from the cinema I know that it was so in our capital where the officials and dignitaries and important foreigners gathered at the new stadium to witness ceremonies, parades, games and traditional dances, but in the villages near tracts of jungle there was little fuss made about it.

The ceremony was held at eight in the morning, before the heat started, on the padang which separated the village from the rubber estate and which usually served as football field. The estate erected an illuminated archway to the padang and, with the assistance of the Malay D.O., organized sports events for the schoolchildren and young men throughout the day.

I attended the reading of our Proclamation of Independence with my father and the Imam; we were the only people present from our kampong. When we arrived, we found but three other Malays, the new D.O. (who had replaced the European officer some months earlier), the schoolteacher and the head of the Boy Scouts, who were scheduled to parade after the local Special Constabulary, and in as near an imitation of them as possible. The paraders were in the coffee-shop having complimentary coffee from its Chinese owner, and cake, too, I suspected. A shed had been set up against the sun, and in it the few Europeans from the rubber estate already were seated. Some Chinese girls on their way to market lounged on the grass in the shade and half a dozen Chinese youths with

cameras scurried about, seeking advantageous angles. There were no Hindus or Sikhs; we weren't more than two dozen people, although the surrounding communities numbered almost seven thousand people.

My father had helped the Imam with his speech and they rehearsed it, timing it, apart from the others. I wanted to sit with the Europeans as I normally would have done, but this was – in a sense – my day and I felt it wiser to stay with my own people, few though we were. It didn't look like a celebration at all, just a cluster of people all dressed up far too early in the morning.

My father was resentful that so few Malays were attending the ceremony, but the Imam asked him what did he expect? *We* were the only ones from our kampong and our kampong was more advanced and richer than most. Besides, he said, the life of the kampong wouldn't be affected by Merdeka, we didn't belong to that class of Malay who would now take over the positions vacated by the retiring British, and we were too far from the cities to profit from the preferential treatment accorded Malays in Government and related fields, and too established and settled to benefit from the new agricultural opportunities open to Malays who would live in undeveloped areas. Merdeka gave us a feeling of national pride: we were a sovereign nation on an equal basis (in theory at least) with other sovereign nations. I couldn't help thinking it was like a graduation. We had decided we were now capable of self-rule, we requested it, obtained it and my father wasn't at all sure that perhaps we hadn't jumped the gun. He had a great respect for the British and for what they had done in our country.

The Constabulary paraded their best, which was better than expected considering their few rehearsals, and the Boy Scouts, solemn-faced, followed them. The D.O. read the Proclamation, the flag was raised and a borrowed phonograph (the coffee-shop again) rendered our national anthem. I quite liked our anthem, it isn't militant like the 'Marseillaise' or glum like 'God Save the Queen'. It has a nice, lilting melody largely, I imagine, because it was

originally a love-song rumoured to have been imported into Perak from the Seychelles. A country which obtains so peaceful an independence as we did should have a peaceful national song.

The Imam prayed, briefly, for the sun was mounting and he stood on a platform without covering, and then copies of our Proclamation were distributed to those present, in Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English. I took a pile of Malay language ones back to the kampong with me, eventually coloured their borders in crayon and gave them to our kampong families. Otherwise they would have been wasted, for only the Europeans took a Malay copy, as a souvenir of the occasion, Mem Helena said later.

The morning was strange to me because I was so cut off from the Europeans who were my friends. Then, too, my very presence indicated how different I had become from the other women of my kampong who had no interest in coming to hear the Proclamation, historic though the event was to us.

That night, plays had been organized, singing and dancing contests, a beauty contest and a contest for the best national costume. The village turned into a fair-ground and was flooded with people from the district. We Malays, in our best clothes, were much in evidence. The Imam said it showed we were a frivolous people, more interested in amusing ourselves than witnessing our independence; and my father retorted, much annoyed, that we seldom had a chance for a good time, we lived such an unvarying routine, so why shouldn't we enjoy ourselves?

The Chinese, with their usual business acumen, set up eating-stalls everywhere and satay-men appeared in abundance, barbecuing the spiced chicken on bamboo slivers so that the odour of roasting and frying food hung heavily over everything. We and the Indians, and a few Chinese not engaged in making money out of the festivities, participated in the contests. I won both the beauty prize and the prize for the best national costume, with Mariammah a close second in her most treasured sari.

The following day I was back at Mem Helena's bungalow and life went on exactly as before. Tuan Ian said over tiffin that in a few years Asians would replace the European assistants on the rubber estates, and a good many managers, too, but, of course, these Asian replacements would be Chinese and Indian. We Malays are small-holders, not hired managers of other people's property.

One early evening when I was visiting Mariammah at Ken's bungalow, something unexpected happened and, as always, it finally had to do with David. Everything somehow led to David sooner or later.

Ken came into the kitchen shed from his shower and announced that he felt like cooking dinner. Both Mariammah and I stared at him in surprise, and then Mariammah said doubtfully in Tamil, 'But *can* you cook, Ken?'

'Of course I can,' he said confidently, in English. 'My mother taught me.' He looked very well that evening, a checked sarong wrapped around his hips, his black hair washed and neatly combed, and a fresh yellow shirt that gave him a somewhat swarthy, piratical appearance. 'I'll make you something you've never tasted before in your life!'

The idea of anybody cooking for her, especially her European Tuan, was certainly astounding to Mariammah. It shocked me a bit, too, but she took it calmly in her quiet way.

'No beef, remember,' she admonished.

'Ah,' Ken retorted in disgust, 'the English *do* eat something besides beef. No beef,' and he bowed elaborately to her, 'and no pork,' and he bowed to me. He brought out all the left-overs from the fridge, irrespective of what they were, dumped them into a casserole dish, hummed while he opened a tin of mutton which he cubed lovingly, seized a handful of spices, apparently at random, daubed the whole concoction with butter, arranged some slices of cheese on top of it and then, on impulse, added raisins and prunes and put the dish into the oven to bake. 'See,' he

said, with a breezy wave of his hand, as we watched this strange assortment become a cohesive dish, 'easy.'

'And when will *that* be ready?' Mariammah asked. She sounded as unconvinced as I felt.

'In an hour,' Ken assured us. 'But it'll keep. We can eat it whenever we feel like it. I'll baste it with beer. You'll stay, Zainah, won't you, and help us eat it?'

'Of course,' I agreed, curious about these unorthodox cooking methods. Basting with beer struck me as particularly exotic, but then Ken thought our curries exotic. It was all a matter of point of view.

'An hour?' Mariammah repeated reflectively. 'Well, then, I'll dance for you. If *you* cook,' and she giggled at the incongruity of it, 'I'll entertain.'

'Dance? An Indian dance?' Ken asked cautiously, and made some outlandish parodying gestures. 'You mean this sort of thing? When you can yank your neck from side to side and keep your body in a still pose?'

'Come,' Mariammah insisted, and her eyes were sparkling. 'if you'll find some Indian music on the radio, I can turn my saris into pantaloons and pile up my hair.' On impulse, I took off the bracelets and necklace I wore and handed them to her, and she began to bedeck herself as she moved towards the bedroom.

We followed her down the five-foot way towards the bungalow, and Ken said to me in a tone of wonderment, 'Doesn't that beat all? Mariammah, the shyest of the shy, offering to dance for us just because I cook. I don't even know what the hell I cooked anyway, Zainah. I never made that dish before!'

'All Indian girls dance,' I told him, 'it's part of their education.'

'I thought Mariammah was uneducated?'

'She's probably picked it up from other girls.'

'D'you think she'll be any good?' He sounded almost apprehensive.

'I suspect she'll be more than good. Whatever Mariammah does, she does well and thoroughly.' I was to remem-

ber that comment later on when Mariammah's final act had been all too thoroughly and too well executed.

I fiddled with the radio dials and found what I knew Mariammah wanted and then suddenly Mariammah was in the room with us, swaying, turning, assuming the complex and graceful Indian age-old postures, her eyes rimmed with kohl, her hair gleaming with bits of tinsel, a piece of brocade artfully fashioned over her 'pantaloons', her feet tinkling with my bracelets. She was a delight to watch, and Ken followed her movements with a smile of sensuous bliss. She was so absorbed in her dance, and we in her, and the Indian wailing-like music was so loud that we never heard the Land-Rover drive to the door. I was the first to see Mem Helena, Tuan Ian and David standing together, transfixed, watching Mariammah. David's face was earnest and concentrated as always when he was faced with something unfamiliar, Mem Helena frankly admiring, and Tuan Ian smiling. Mariammah saw them next and stopped abruptly, and no amount of pleading with her could make her continue to dance. She said she would not dance before strange men, and switched off the radio in a rare gesture of finality.

'We've come from monkey-shooting,' Tuan Ian said, as Ken drew them into the living-room and Mariammah stood undecided. It was David who saved the situation.

'Well, if Mariammah won't dance alone for us,' he said, 'why don't we all dance together? Zainah, can't you get us some good ronggeng music? You wouldn't object to that, would you, Mariammah?' She shook her head uncertainly, anxious not to offend but unsure of what to do. 'Come on,' he urged, 'let's see what we can find.'

'My dinner!' Ken shouted suddenly. 'You must all stay and eat my dinner. I've cooked it myself. I'll just go put twice as much in it again,' and he dashed off before the others could accept.

When he returned we had found the music we wanted, and Mem Helena showed him the steps he didn't know.

'Like a slow samba,' she explained, 'but you don't

touch your partner, you're on your own. That should suit you!' and she smiled wickedly at him.

'You mean, that'll appeal to the ham in me,' he muttered, but watched her and imitated her easily.

We lined up, the women opposite the men, and danced towards each other, around each other and back to starting places, an odd assortment in our various costumes. Then, an old folk-dance was played which both Mem Helena and I knew, and we showed the others how to dance it. We sat down opposite each other and, one by one, we rose and danced, weaving in and out of the double line, improvising a song as we danced. Mem Helena began and sang in Malay, saying that surprises like tonight were always the best fun. Then Tuan Ian answered her, in English, saying that you needed the right people to make the right surprises. Then it was my turn, and I added to that by saying that the right people always came together in the right circumstances at the right time, and David, who understood my Malay, replied in English that he was especially glad to be included among the right people, time and circumstances. Then Ken, in a chant, said he wanted to keep up and would show us his Malay: satu, dua, tiga, tabek Tuan, mata hari and how was that. He could say the same in Tamil? We were laughing at him when Mariammah got up and repeated it all exactly in Tamil, and then the music came to an end and a new programme was announced. Mem Helena clapped her hands in delight; Ken twirled the dials and found a jazz band; Tuan Ian slipped an arm about his wife's waist, and Ken, never one to lose a chance, did the same to Mariammah who was too astonished to resist. David and I, by chance, were in the doorway.

'My God,' David said, watching Ken teach Mariammah to jive, 'what ungainly pranks after the stateliness of the Indian dance and the delicate restraint of the joget. Dancing your own dances suits you, Zainah. You epitomize everything they are, exquisiteness and restraint and control and the charm of conscious indolence.'

'Is that how you think of me, exquisite and indolent?'

'At least you have none of that wild abandon, that savagery that characterises us,' he said, and laughed when Mariammah refused to be swung off her feet.

'You forget,' I told him, with a trace of bitterness, 'the orang-puteh claims we Malays are just recently off the trees!'

'Don't be a little fool,' David said impatiently. 'When the Ethelreds and Ediths, who were our ancestors,' and he nodded towards Mem Helena and Tuan Ian, 'were busy hamstringing each other and clubbing and burning and invading Danes, you were dancing a measured, relaxed thoroughly civilized dance that hasn't changed in 1,200 years.'

'You're juggling history,' I objected. 'You're bringing civilization to us today.'

'All the comforts of materialism,' David said gravely, 'will not wipe out this damned spot of savagery in us.'

'You think we have none?' I asked.

'My dear,' David was adopting his fatherly tone, 'your country is not a devouring warrior-nation like Alexander's Macedon, or Caesar's Rome, or Victoria's England or the Americans' Pioneer. What greater attribute has a civilization than to live a peaceful life?'

Ken danced by us and called out, 'Come join the fun. This isn't a patch on all that come-hither Indian stuff, but at least I can *do* it!'

David turned to me and opened his arms. 'Shall we dance?' he invited.

Suddenly I realized that dancing was not merely the impersonal thing I had assumed. When the westerner dances, he can do a great deal more than merely dance, as I saw by the way Ken had cuddled a pliant Mariammah to him, by the way Tuan Ian had his lips in Mem Helena's hair. If I danced now with David, he would hold me subtly away from him. We would be the two dancers surrounded by four lovers.

'It's too hot,' I objected, and he dropped his arms.

'You mean,' he said lightly, 'we don't fit,' and he nodded his head at the room.

Even then, it didn't occur to me that we could.

About a week after that, David drove to my house in the kampong. I forget why I was there instead of at Mem Helena's but I remember my father was on the veranda with me. The two men exchanged greetings in Malay, my father speaking slowly and carefully and David stumbling along. Then David turned to me, his eyes laughing, and said, 'Would you like to come to town with me and meet Ishmael and Queequeg? I can't spare you Ahab, he'll be there, too.'

For an instant I had no idea what he was talking about, and then the names fell into place from that morning when Mem Helena and I had brought food to him in his bungalow when he was ill. So they were just friends, I thought. It had all been idle chit-chat. I looked towards my father, out of courtesy, and told him David was asking me to town to meet friends, and he nodded and smiled his consent.

'Come as you are,' David said. 'We must be punctual and we'll have to race as it is.'

He concentrated on driving, and I didn't interrupt him with questions. I thought his friends had outlandish names, but then many of the European names are very strange, with hyphens and double ffs preceding them, and prefixes like Mac or just O, and additives like burger or man.

He parked rather violently before the best cinema house and ran to the ticket booth, leaving me to follow him. While he waited impatiently in the short line, I looked around at the small crowd, hoping to find his three friends. Then he was with me, pulling me inside.

'But where are they?' I asked, 'We'll never find them in the dark.'

'The whale is made of rubber,' he said cryptically, 'and the whaling scenes are real. That's the way it was done.'

As he hustled me along, I had no time to find out what

he was taking me to see. Another western I presumed, and then we were in the dark, groping for seats, the ads for soap and cars and powdered milk just finishing.

I never pay attention to screen credits so I was twisting and turning in my seat, accustoming my eyes to the darkness, wondering why we had to be so punctual for people we weren't meeting. I was dismayed David had told a lie – he never lied – and I gave an uneasy attention to the opening of the film, the picture of a boy swinging along a hillside. Then a voice from the screen said distinctly, 'Call me Ishmael.'

The shock of discovery was like a physical impact. I froze with attention, my eyes glued to the screen, almost holding my breath with excitement. There had been no secret lovers' code, merely a reference to something they both knew, this film that David was taking me to see. There were no friends to be met, but characters to be learned about, and David had not lied to my father.

'It follows the book pretty exactly,' David muttered next to me, but I was too rigid with excitement to respond. Perhaps his was a book everybody read and any European would have caught the allusion. How much, I thought angrily, how much I *don't* know! I clapped my hands inadvertently for Queequeg's appearance and saw exactly what Mem Helena had in mind. He was as tall and dark and strong as the Fijians who fought beside the British against the terrorists in the jungle, but his hair was different. He would have created quite a sensation on the estate. As for Ahab, I felt as Mem Helena did about him, but frightened, too. When the show was over I leaned back limply in my seat and, as the lights came up, a book-vendor, with a tray of books strung from his neck, circulated apathetically around the audience, selling paperbacks of the novel. 'Shall I buy you the book?' David asked and, without waiting for my reply, signalled to the man to come to us.

David counted out change and handed the paper-back to me. Around us a few men were sufficiently stimulated

by the sight of a sale to follow suit, and with a smile David said, 'I ought to get a commission.'

I took the book hesitantly. Nobody had ever given me a *book* before. Jewellery and clothes and sweetmeats, but not a book; and of course I had never had occasion to buy one for myself.

'Would you write something in it?' I asked, opening it and smoothing out the title page. David started to object so I added hastily, 'This is my first book.'

If I had suddenly announced the world was square, David couldn't have looked more astounded.

'What do you mean?' he asked sharply. 'Don't you *own* any books?'

'No, of course not. Why should I? I belong to two lending libraries, and owning books in the tropics is silly. Look at all the trouble Mem Helena has always taking hers out of the shelves and wiping off the mason bees' nests.'

'You've never *bought* a book?' David was strangely insistent.

'But, David, why should I?' I remonstrated. 'When I have spare cash, I do what all girls here do. I buy a scarf or a sarong or lipstick or something pretty, but not a *book*.'

'I can't imagine being without books,' he said helplessly. 'I mean, not *owning* any. They're like ...' He grimaced and went on. 'At the risk of sentimentality, like friends. Don't you ever feel you'd like to *keep* a book? To re-read it?'

'I can always ask for it again from the lending library,' I pointed out.

'But how do you know *when* you'll feel like re-reading it?' he demanded with a sort of groan of exasperation.

'It doesn't matter when,' I said. 'Time isn't all that important.' I held out the open book to him. 'Do write in it, David.'

He took the book and then surveyed me speculatively. Around us clustering knots of people were moving towards

the doors. The bookseller was doing a suddenly thriving trade.

'You felt left out that day, didn't you?' he asked abruptly.

'What day?' I hedged, although I knew perfectly well.

'The day you and Helena brought food to my bungalow when I was sick.' When I didn't answer, he went on. 'You thought we had a conspiracy between us, special words, signals, Boy Scout stuff, didn't you?'

'I didn't know what to think,' I mumbled.

'We didn't leave you out,' he said thoughtfully, 'you left yourself out. By not knowing enough.'

'Well, I can't know *everything*!' I flared.

'Neither can we. But certain kinds of people have similar knowledge and tend to drift together. They talk the same language, and I don't mean English or German or Sanskrit.'

'I'm learning,' I said wearily. 'You rush me so.'

'I don't want you to feel rushed,' he said gravely. 'A great part of your charm is your serenity, your refusal to treat time as an all-important factor.'

'Write in my book, David,' I said.

'I don't know what to say.'

'From David to Zainah,' I suggested. 'And the date.'

'That sounds pretty impersonal,' he objected, and then, when I said nothing, he reached for his pen, wrote, snapped shut the book and handed it back to me.

I didn't open it to see what he had written. I simply assumed he had written what I'd proposed. It wasn't until I was at home again that night that I opened it out of curiosity, planning to read a little by the lamp on the veranda, and then I saw what he had written. 'From David, with love to Zainah,' and the date. I felt wonderfully elated at the inscription without quite knowing why.

When Sunday came, Ken took Mariamah to town for a film; the new green assistant went off for the day to contact friends to find him another job, as it was quite

obvious the manager was through with him already; the manager attended a wedding and reception sixty miles away, and Tuan Ian motored south to pick up a load of budwood. This left David in charge, and he took a coffee-break from duty in mid-afternoon.

We sat together in the coffee-shop, Mem Helena, David and I, eating cake and drinking coffee and back on the same pre-Yoke Chan footing, which, I think, was a relief to all of us. Birds of passage like Yoke Chan should fly swiftly to retain their appeal. Although the rubber trees know no Sundays and estate work continues, there is somehow a holiday feeling in the air, an easing-up of pressure. When we had finished, we stood around David's Land-Rover. I remember David lit a cigarette. I don't know what made me look up between the shops, idleness I guess, but I did, and saw in the sky in the far distance a black plume slowly mounting into the blue afternoon. It was a windless, hot day, the end of a dry spell, and I knew at once what that black plume meant.

'David,' I blurted out, 'look! That means there's a fire on the estate!' In my excitement I grabbed his elbow with one hand and pointed with the other. The village was in a typical Sunday afternoon somnolence, and in any case the villagers didn't care what happened on the rubber estate.

David followed my pointing finger and so did Mem Helena, standing by his shoulder, and then he said abruptly, 'My God! And this is the day I'm alone on the tote.' He bit his lip and then said with a transparent lightness, 'Well, got to do something about that.'

'Have you ever fought a fire before?' Mem Helena asked calmly, climbing into the Land-Rover, and he shook his head as he pulled himself in behind the wheel.

'Well, *we* have,' she said reassuringly, which wasn't the case at all. No doubt *she* had, but I'd never done more than watch from a distance. 'That makes two of us to help you direct the fighting. Drive to the lines, David, and round up a lorry-load of men to follow us. It means extra

pay for them, so you won't be short of volunteers.' She spoke as easily as if she were planning a dinner party. 'I think that fire is on the edge of the jungle, in the lallang by the young rubber, so we'll have to dash through the trees. There's no road in there.'

The fire was some distance away, and it was twenty minutes before we reached it with a lorry following us as we tracked through the rubber trees. Mem Helena had been right, there were plenty of fire-fighters and they behaved as if they were on a gala outing, shouting and gesticulating. The fire itself was easy to find, for the nearer we came to it the paler the sun was overhead as the smoke obscured it. Sunlight through smoke is a sickly, eerie light. David said it's what winter sunshine looks like in cold, damp countries. The smoke sifted through the trees like a fog, and Mem Helena tied her handkerchief around her hair and told me to do likewise.

'Hair's inflammable,' she said, 'and we've got lots of it.'

When the Land-Rover and lorry could go no farther, we piled out and ran through the trees, across the bunds, towards the densest smoke until Mem Helena called to David and said he'd better start his counter-fire here, and to spread the men out in a long line before the young rubber, and facing the lallang.

The fire roared and thrashed in the lallang before us, still hidden from us, but coming inexorably towards the healthy immature rubber, a determined destroyer. If it reached the young rubber and snaked along the dry cover crop, the whole area would blaze up, our years of work and a fortune would be wiped out. It would take an additional four years of work and another fortune to re-plant the rubber and grow it to this size. These particular trees were the proudest experiment on the estate, for they had been grown from special clones, had grown far quicker than was normal and were due to come into tapping long before the average tree. In addition, they were expected to give high yields of latex. If David couldn't save them, he could call an end to his planting career, and we all knew

it, down to the most disinterested labourer concerned only with his extra pay and not with the trees.

David waved to the men, indicating a line of defence between the young rubber and the lallang, and they scattered obediently. They were old hands at fire-fighting, and didn't care at all whether this was David's first or fifty-first fire.

Under Mem Helena's casual instructions, given as if she were just chatting with him, David plucked a fresh branch from the nearest rubber tree and swept all dry debris into the lallang before him, then cleared a swath of earth behind him and alongside of him. The men did the same, calling jokes and obscenities to each other, chewing betel nut and spitting into the brush. The front we held on the verge of the young rubber was perhaps half a mile long.

The smoke became denser and we coughed. Whatever animals had been in that area had long since fled elsewhere. No bird passed near us, only the insect-life, huge horse-flies, came to plague us.

We all heard it at the same time, and the men stood for an instant immobile in their places, staring into the impenetrable bushes and trees and heavy, tangled undergrowth. The fire was talking.

Above its war-cry and crackle we now saw for the first time the tall spurts of orange flame shooting through the murky smoke. It looked wicked, evil, the pall of the smoke choked us, and the hollow noise of a rampaging fire consuming a gargantuan meal with inexhaustible appetite was plainly frightening. I felt my throat tighten and my heart beat faster. I was all too aware that once the fire reached the rubber it could travel faster than I could run. David turned to look at Mem Helena behind him; he was composed but tense, and she winked at him, as if it were all a game. I wondered uneasily if the fires she had helped fight were as large and mean and uncontrolled as this one.

The men began looking towards David, waiting for his signal to light the dry material piled up before them and head a counter-fire towards the lallang. They held burning

brands at intervals along the line, something like Olympic runners in a relay. They were plainly eager to light up and ignite the lallang before them, the space between them and the fire-monster was decreasing rapidly. The inactivity was trying, the insects galling, the noise fearsome and suddenly Mem Helena called softly, 'Now!'

David raised his hand and touched his burning stick to the debris before him which flamed at once, and the man next to him snatched the stick from him and did the same to his pile, and so it went all down the line. Then they began a frantic vigilance that the new fire could not run backwards and feed on the young rubber behind us. Any spark, any ember was at once pounced upon and extinguished, and our small new fire had to eat its way forward into the lallang or starve. It looked puny and ineffective against the giant that strode towards us, hot and red-orange, glowing fiercely, and bellowing. I was grateful there was no wind to further hurry it towards us.

The heat was suffocating I was drenched in sweat, and the horse-flies bit mercilessly so that our skin was distended into unsightly red lumps where it was exposed. I was too keyed-up to feel any acute discomfort and, like the others, I watched our miserable little counter-fire push steadily forward towards the raging, burning jungle, gaining height as it advanced. The heavy brown smoke coiled about us, and although the sun shone brightly we stood in an opaque twilight.

Without realizing what I was doing, I had gradually worked my way to Mem Helena's side. We both stood behind David. She put her hand on my arm and I felt she was shaking.

'The fires are meeting,' she said softly.

I expected a titanic battle, something dramatic and frightful, for it seemed only correct that when two such forces met there must be a war. Prepared as I was for a great climax, I could hardly believe what I saw, and so great was my disappointment that I felt no relief when I realized we had been successful in our fight. The monstrous

lallang fire clashed with our lesser counter-fire, and then both died, drooping lower and lower as the lallang fire embraced our fire in a death clasp and found no further fodder to sustain itself. Where there had been a noisy ugly wall of flame there was now only smoke. Both fires were finished.

'Post some guards, David,' Mem Helena said, untying the kerchief from her hair, 'just to make sure no stray sparks start up a new fire. And don't forget to take the names of the men here who have volunteered. When it comes to extra pay, you'll want to know who's entitled to it.' She withdrew her hand from my arm and started picking her way over the rough ground to the Land-Rover.

'Have you fought many fires as big as that?' I asked her, as I tagged behind.

She turned to give me an oblique glance, and then said with amusement in her voice, 'Didn't *you* see through me? I've never fought a fire before.'

'But how did you know - ' I began, when she broke in, anticipating my question, 'I've watched Ian do it, just as you watched David today.'

It was not until we were back in Mem Helena's bungalow, standing on the terrace avidly drinking iced water from the carafe always kept there, that I saw how filthy we were, soot and sweat stains spread over our clothes, our faces grimed and our hair sodden. As I had a supply of clothes in the nursery, I went off to shower and change into a fresh sarong and jacket.

When I returned to the terrace, Mem Helena and David were seated side by side on the flower trough that flanked one side. I saw they were talking earnestly, so I withdrew. Once again Mem Helena's hands were between David's, the empty water tumblers on the ground by their feet. I thought no matter what happens on the estate, good or bad, the result is always the same: it brings Mem Helena and David into another shared experience, another link in their rich emotional chain. I stood before the weapon collection and waited for them to call me, or notice me or

stop talking. They hadn't lowered their voices. It was almost as if they were asking me to listen.

'I don't care what you do, David, but it must end,' Mem Helena said, and she sounded both desperate and urgent.

'One can't end feelings,' David said. 'I've told you: feelings aren't under our control. You mustn't ask for the impossible.'

'You'll have to go away,' Mem Helena decided reluctantly.

'How can I?' he returned quickly. 'If I break my contract I have too little experience and no reason for leaving except whim to get another job out here, and I want to be out here somewhere. This is where *you* are. When I come back from leave, I shall certainly be sent to another estate, but at least I'll have news of you. I'll be able to keep track of you. I won't be on the other side of the world from you.'

'I don't know what to do, David,' Mem Helena said in an uncertain tone. 'You make me very unhappy.'

'God forbid,' David almost shouted. 'That's the last thing I want to do! Now, Helena, I'll do anything you ask of me. But tell me just one thing truthfully: do you want me in your life or not?'

There was a long pause. I thought perhaps Mem Helena wouldn't answer, and then she said with a slow sigh, 'No, David, I don't. I cannot bear to have you in my life. I cannot bear to question my marriage, my husband, my children, my home. I cannot *stand* you in my life because I love you.'

'There is only one way for me to go from you,' David said, 'it's in the marriage ceremony.'

'No!' Mem Helena cried out. 'You must not say such a thing.'

'But I *have* said it.' There was the sound of a glass knocked over on the tiles, and I knew David had stood up.

It was this conversation I had in mind when I told Tuan

Ian, later, after the assassins had been hired, that David could save himself but that he wouldn't because he *wanted* to die, he had the death-wish.

FOUR

I SUPPOSE David was so uncaring about what happened to him that he simply drifted towards Virginia the way a twig drifts in a current, now and then hitting a rock, swirling around it, and then continuing. I can remember exactly when he met Virginia, because that was the day the manager beat up the little boy who herded the cattle.

White men grow eccentric in the tropics, and one gets used to many quirks in their behaviour. Tuan Ian maintained the whole thing was just another temper tantrum, but I witnessed the beating and I told Mem Helena I thought the manager was mad.

Although Tuan Ian did the work on the estate, it was the manager and his Chinese keep who determined the hiring and firing and contracting of labour. The manager operated on the fear principle, largely, I suspect, because he himself was afraid a harmonious estate might lead the company to think he wasn't as essential in controlling the property as he wished them to believe. His theory was to divide and rule, a concept as obsolete as Britain's nineteenth-century policy would be if she attempted it in the twentieth century, but then the manager was hardly a modern man.

His tricks were well known but, even so, there was no way to avoid them. Moreover, since he had no hobby other than drink and was uninterested in intellectual pursuits, he had to turn to the estate for amusement. Aside from his rages, his two favourite diversions were the invasion of the Asians' privacy and the persecuting of whatever European assistant he had selected as his whipping boy.

He liked to drive up to the bungalow with one of his Asian staff (the tappers and weeders were abused in the fields when he chanced to meet them and was in a bad mood), screech to a stop that sent children, chickens and dogs in-

to a flurry, then stamp into the house and, before his wife and parents and offspring, abuse the head of the house, a kanghani, a conductor, a member of the office staff – it didn't matter who it was so long as the man was Asian, usually a Tamil, for Ah Fan always felt insulted when he lost his temper at Chinese. Often his tirades were as unreasonable and incoherent as they were unjustified, but the staff suffered through them as part of their job, dreading these descents into their homes and nervously exhausted by them. Tuan Ian spent considerable time putting back dignity and confidence in the men the manager demoralized with his rantings.

It could never be said of him that he was a cruel man. He was merely wicked. He enjoyed, for example, firing an ageing man he himself had hired several years before just before the man's retirement pension was due. Once dismissed, the man was too old to find a new job and, jobless, was ineligible for a pension. Another favourite pastime was to overwork a man for several months before the time became due to award salary increases, which was done at the discretion of the manager once a certain grade had been reached. It was natural for a worker to assume that in exchange for a fourteen-hour day he would be rewarded, but usually when the time came the manager 'forgot' about the extra work. Yet, if that extra work wasn't voluntarily given, the man could be fired. Petty sadism was the manager's element. Tuan Ian claimed he was subconsciously getting back at the Japanese for their treatment of him in Siam. I'm not at all convinced of that.

With the European assistants (and this accounted for the high turnover), he enjoyed picking out one of them and then hounding him – in his work, in his private life, in his time off. He would summon the unfortunate to his bungalow and rave for an hour or so. Sometimes he descended to the assistant's bungalow and threw his scene there. Anything the assistant did was wrong, even if he did exactly what the manager told him to do. As soon as somebody attracted the manager's attention, as Tuan Ian

phrased it, we knew his time on the estate was limited.

The basic characteristics of the manager's personality were always there, and I can agree with Tuan Ian only so far that perhaps the experiences on the railway working for the Japanese *aggravated* traits which otherwise might have remained latent. But Siam never produced them, never created them.

I inclined to agree with Mem Helena that he had been fashioned by the slum area which bred him. And as she described to me that section of Glasgow called the Gorbals, where he was born and lived as a child, it sounded to me like a hell on earth, and only devils could come out of it. He never concealed his humble birth, he liked to say he was 'a rough diamond', but Mem Helena claimed he was neither rough nor a diamond, but plain uncouth.

David had a different theory. He said all small men had complexes and had to compensate. The manager was small for a white man, and thin with a wiry strength. The only big thing about him was his paunch, a beer-and-whisky belly that stuck out from his bony frame like a football, vaguely obscene. He had black crisp hair that curled tightly, but not enough of it to cover his head, and when he sweated, which was much of the time, it wisped around his head and exposed great patches of naked pink scalp, so that he looked a bit like a dog with mange. David insisted he shouted as a means of asserting himself. Little men who wished to be important found shouting an easy way to attract attention to themselves. And the smaller the man, David claimed, the larger the ego, the bigger the noise. A small man demanding recognition was a sure sign of maladjustment.

The cattle-herder episode was a bit out of the ordinary gambit of temper display. It occurred before breakfast around half-past nine when I was taking a short-cut through the rubber from the market. Mem Helena's bungalow, my plastic-string shopping bag full of fruits and vegetables. When she was busy in the nursery with the new baby, I often did the marketing for her. That was the

morning she wanted to whitewash the nursery and put up new curtains and I was to help her sew.

I heard the cattle before I saw them, a herd of thin-ribbed cows snuffling gently along looking for fodder in the undergrowth between the trees. They were owned by several families living in the near-by labour lines, and were tended alternately by a little seven-year-old boy or his grandfather. This depended on school holidays and the grandfather's health. There were, perhaps, ten beasts, all told.

We passed each other and the child greeted me with a smile, his teeth tooth-paste white in his black little face. He was a pleasant-looking Tamil boy, skipping along by the grazing cows, filled with good spirits and childish surplus energy.

When I heard the sound of a Land-Rover along the estate road, I thought nothing of it. I knew from the engine it wasn't David's, so I walked on. I heard it turn down into the rubber and thought idly the driver must be in a hurry to cut through the trees where there was no marked path. I heard it brake hard and an instant later there were a man's shouts, a child's scream, the dull thud of blows and the lowing of the startled cattle.

I dropped my shopping bag and ran back through the rubber. The manager was holding the little herder by the arm with one powerful hand and with the other he beat the child with his walking stick. Above the boy's shrieks, I could hear what he was shouting.

'Those bloody cows are forbidden!' The words staggered out, keeping time with the blows. 'They bring flies!' The pliable cane whistled and slammed. 'No goddamn cows near my bungalow!'

The child wriggled free and, yelling at the top of his lungs, pelted off through the rubber, abandoning his uneasy herd. I saw his torn shirt, the welts on his back and the blood across his shoulders, and then the manager, his face swollen and contorted, his eyes wild and bloodshot, saw me.

‘What the hell are you doing trespassing on my property? Get the hell out of here!’

I wasn’t trespassing, and the estate was not his property, it belonged to the company who employed him.

I wanted to say something in protest, but he brandished his cane at me and took a step in my direction. With his dishevelled black hair and his face mottled with anger, his cane thrashing aimlessly about him and his distended belly wagging with the effort of so much unaccustomed physical exertion, he looked a menacing, repulsive sight, and I simply turned and ran back to where I’d dropped the shopping bag, and then ran on to Mem Helena’s and told her what I had seen.

It was to make me forget the incident that Mem Helena suggested David take me into town for a movie and ice-cream after an early dinner. I was more upset about the episode than I showed, for uncontrolled tempers and violence have always made me nervous, and I picked at my food and then was silent during the drive to town in David’s fast little sports car. I remember it was a lovely, starry night, the perfect tropical evening and that I thought I should be enjoying the drive more, the fact of being with David and riding in such a fine car.

The film was, as usual, a western, which are always popular with all audiences, Chinese, Tamils and us. I think we’re better informed about the Wild West of the last century in the States than the average American, and we’re familiar with all the frontier heroes, both white and Indian. The picture absorbed me, although I clutched David’s arm through the gun-play, and when the lights came on and everybody got up to go, I sat in my seat, avoiding the crush.

I heard my name called and looked around and there, two rows behind me, was Virginia. She was with some other Eurasian girls who were already moving towards the exit.

‘Where have you been?’ Virginia asked loudly. ‘I see you so seldom!’

'Who's your friend?' David inquired with lazy disinterest. 'Invite her for a soda with us, if you like.' He sounded positively paternal.

Virginia looked very well, so I suspected he was acting just a bit. Her pale Eurasian face was crowned with a thick and luxuriant mop of strong black hair, softly waved so that it framed her high forehead, exposed her shapely ears and set off to advantage her large, black Indian eyes. Her frock was new and fashionable and vivid, a bright orange cotton, and her smiling lips were scarlet and moist. She was handsome, a full-blown sort of girl, healthy and large-scaled, for when one looked closely, all her features were too big, just as her calves were too heavy and her ankles too large. But the overall effect was excellent.

'Come meet my friend David,' I called back. 'Have you time for a soda with us?' I remembered her family insisted she be home early. I was certain she would be sufficiently discreet not to mention anything unseemly about my six months in town when I had seen quite a lot of her. I also wondered, looking at her generous bosom, if she were still a virgin. She had always insisted she was saving herself for the man she loved, and she found my promiscuity shocking although I think she envied my popularity.

'Yes, love to!' she said cheerfully, and her black eyes flashed with pleasure.

We met in the aisle of the movie house. I introduced her to David, and after a slight pause he said in his smoothest, most fatherly tone, 'And how are you, my dear?'

He overdid it to such an extent that I found it comical, but Virginia blushed prettily and looked delighted. Perhaps, I thought, Virginia might be able to distract David, even if only temporarily, from his obsession with Mem Helena.

I was glad to be doing Virginia a favour. She had been good to me those six months, helpful however critical, and I knew David to be a perfect escort. I was surprised that

she seemed excited to meet him, and more surprised when she said she had seen him about town and wondered who he was, but had no idea he was a friend of mine.

Perhaps I was obtuse, but then David had always been a being apart for me, belonging as he did to Mem Helena, and so I never imagined anybody could really reach him. We sat in a newly-opened air-conditioned ice-cream parlour, the only one in town, and while we drank jumbo-sodas through plastic straws, David gulped iced beer. Virginia chattered. Somewhere half through my soda it occurred to me that Virginia was talking too much, and I looked curiously at her. Then, despite the air-conditioning, I saw the small beads of perspiration on her upper lip and along her temples, and the wet stain under her armpits and I realized Virginia was tense and over-excited. I half-suspected what was up, but I didn't pursue the thought. I grasped at the truth but didn't examine it.

'I never thought I'd meet you,' Virginia was saying. 'You don't come to town very often.' Without waiting for an answer, she rushed on, 'And of course mostly when I saw you, you were with Yoke Chan.'

'Do you know Yoke Chan?' David asked.

'Oh, everybody *knows* Yoke Chan,' Virginia assured him, 'but I've never *spoken* to her.'

It was a naïve and unconscious way of telling David that she was a good girl rather than a good-time girl, and he understood at once as I saw by the slight smile that touched his mouth.

We talked a little more, about the firm we'd seen, about the estate, and we each had a second soda. I think Virginia would have downed twenty sodas quite happily so long as she had David opposite her. I was so used to David that I forgot, or overlooked, what a handsome man he could be in a fresh shirt and well-pressed trousers. I invariably saw him sweat-soaked and dirty when I met him on the estate, or else when dressed up, eclipsed by Mem Helena and her crisp loveliness.

'Well, now, Virginia ... may I call you Virginia?'

David asked, and when she breathed a fervent happy 'please do', he went on in that suave manner that I knew to be assumed, for there was nothing slick about David. 'Well, now, Virginia, as we've met, do you suppose I might ring you up and take you to a film or a dance some time? I can get your number from Zainah. You have a phone, haven't you?'

'That would be nice,' Virginia said, and threw me a grateful look. 'Yes, of course I have a phone. I live with my family.'

Once again, and unwittingly, she emphasized her respectability.

'Then I'll be getting in touch with you,' David promised.

She came to the car with us, but as it only held two we couldn't drop her off at her house. She squeezed my hand in the dark and then waved to us as we drove off.

'Such a wholesome girl,' David commented, expertly twisting along the crowded streets where the night-vendors had set up food-stalls and portable kitchens and put out their display of cheap shirts and blouses and pots and pans and plates. 'Such a change from - ' and he bit off the rest, unwilling to mention Yoke Chan.

I know that the relationship which developed between David and Virginia will be misinterpreted. Whenever a woman is illegally pregnant it is always assumed the man is at fault. It wasn't so in this case. I am deeply sorry for Virginia, even jealous, I'm afraid, but the reason for that comes out only later. What I want now to stress is that Virginia made all the moves towards David. It was Virginia who telephoned him to invite him to that first dance, a charity affair that her boss had given her two tickets for. She worked as a typist during the day for a Chinese refrigerator agency. It was Virginia who took the town bus and sat through the long hot ride to the estate and then walked from the main road to David's bungalow to call on him, at first just for tea, then for dinner.

It doesn't matter how many times they saw each other, or where, or what they said to each other. I don't know

and it isn't my concern. Mem Helena used to smile a lot those days, determined to be cheerful, but it was a twisted, rueful little smile, and she often sighed

'I suppose I should be glad David's found a diversion that isn't making him unhappy,' she said to me once

As for me, I was angry and miserable when Virginia wrote me a little note confiding that she was pregnant and upset that David wouldn't marry her, but pleased to be having his child. She asked me to be with her when her time came. As it turns out, that may not be possible, although I've given her my promise. The point is, Virginia fell so completely in love with David that no price was too high to pay for his company.

What I have to say next is the turning point of my life. Just as, at first, I never imagined myself in western dress and then became thoroughly used to it, or never imagined having western friends and then found Mem Helena and her husband and David and even Ken, just as I never thought I'd enjoy western foods eaten with a flotilla of knives and forks and spoons, or grow to like western music, so I never imagined myself in an intimate relationship with David, a western man wrapped up in a woman of his own kind.

I was posing one morning for Mem Helena who had taken to working hard at her painting. It was a difficult pose as I was kneeling, and each time I rested we had to be careful to rearrange exactly the folds of my sarong when I resumed the pose. It was Mem Helena's most ambitious canvas to date, consisting of three feminine figures, and I was the model for all three. If it was successful, Mem Helena planned to have it photographed and use it on her Christmas cards.

During one of these rests, when I was sitting on the grass, David drove up in his Land-Rover, just as on that first day when Mem Helena had been hanging up the laundry and doing the washing in the Shanghai jar. I'd been fidgety and restless all morning, and I put it down to the strain of the pose. I'd been thinking a good deal

about David in the previous week, but then I always thought about David ever since I had first met him. I had thought of David and Mem Helena, David and Yoke Chan, David and Virginia, David's childhood, David's adventures, David's tastes. David was an ever-present part of my thoughts.

He was bringing Mem Helena a big bunch of rambutans from the tree in his back yard, and as he jumped out of the Land-Rover with the prickly red fruit on its leafy branches in his arms, I felt a sudden sharp twinge in my body and realized I was irrationally glad to see him, that, in fact, I'd been *wanting* to see him. Then, when he crossed over to us and tossed me a casual 'Hello, Zainah' and put the branches into Mem Helena's hands I had a surge of hot anger against her. I was wildly jealous, resentful of David's attention to her, and the feeling of misery and annoyance I had had when I read Virginia's note saying she was to have a baby by David was now grown so big that I trembled with rage. I wanted David to be handing those rambutans to *me*. I wanted it to be not Virginia who was having his baby, but *me*. That was how I discovered I loved David.

It shouldn't have happened. I had been with him so much, knew him so well that I should have been immune to him, but I suppose each step of my education in the ways of the western world was one more step towards David, who was the goal of that education as well as the example.

You would suppose that when a woman has been a man's friend for a long time that she will never fall in love with him. But there are many ways of falling in love, violently, at first sight, gently through association and, as in my case, surprisingly and overwhelmingly through discovery. I dare say I had loved David for quite a while before I became aware of it.

I sat there on the lawn, chewing a blade of grass, the smell of the paint about me, the air still cool and morning-fresh. David faced me, talking to Mem Helena, whose back

was towards me. I found myself shaking, and I had a shocking impulse to rise and throw myself at David, to feel him against me. I think my intent and passionate look must somehow have reached him, for his eyes left Mem Helena's face and he looked over his shoulder at me. As he looked, his expression changed, and I felt myself blushing, a deep, shameful blush of admission. At that moment the telephone rang and Mem Helena moved off to answer it.

David stood exactly where he was, turned to stone, staring at me, first in disbelief and then in dismay and I stared back at him.

'Zainah!' he said, and it sounded like a cry of despair.

'I can't help it!' I hurled at him, and heard my own voice, hoarse and low. The tears were pressing against my eyes and my throat was closed. 'I can't help it!' I repeated. 'I didn't want this to happen. I didn't know it could happen. I can't help my feelings!'

From inside the bungalow came the sound of Mem Helena's voice, quiet and even, talking to Tuan Ian at the office. David took a step towards me and then stopped, looking down at me.

'I'll try to be considerate,' he said, in a distant, formal voice. 'You know, of course, exactly where *my* feelings lie.' I had nothing to say, I simply watched him. With a sudden gesture he raised his hands and slammed one fist into the palm of his other hand and shook both hands and said in a burst of wrath, 'I could *bawl* like a baby!' His face *did* look crumpled, but men like David never cry. 'I feel I've lost my closest friend, my trusted support. I have nobody now, nobody I can be *honest* with!'

'Think how I feel!' I had raised my voice and it cracked. 'Do you imagine I *wanted* this to happen?'

'Yes,' he said slowly, 'yes, I think this is exactly what you wanted to have happen, this is your *secret* wish. You know I can't have the woman I want, so you want me to choose *you*.'

Then, as Mem Helena came back from the bungalow,

I burst into tears, for I realized with an awful poignancy that not only had I lost my friendship with David but I was losing hers as well. I was now embarked on a course where I could no longer confide in her, where I would have to dissemble and, worst of all, where I hated her instead of loving her because I couldn't stand David loving her, or she him.

'Zainah, what's wrong?' she asked, alarmed and hurrying towards me, and then, to David, 'Whatever have you said to her? I've never seen her in tears before.'

'It's not what *I've* said,' David answered coldly. 'It's what she said to me.'

I lost control at that and sprang to my feet. I remember throwing away the blade of grass and flinging my arms wide.

'It's fallen down around my ears,' I cried out, 'my whole world's tumbled around me!'

'What are you talking about?' Mem Helena asked, bewildered, and although she tried to put her arm around me, I shoved her away. 'We're still here, right here. David's here, I'm here.'

I think I clenched my fists at my sides, and I know I leaned towards David and literally spat the words at him.

'Why did you have to be born?' I threw at him. 'You bring nothing but trouble and calamity and sorrow!'

With that, I turned and raced away across the lawn and into the rubber. Behind me I heard Mem Helena's agitated voice calling me, and then David admonishing above her calls, 'Let her be, Helena! Let her be! She'll come to her senses.'

I flung myself on the ground under the rubber trees and wept for my heartache. I stayed there all day, sobbing, falling asleep with exhaustion and waking to weep again. I didn't see how I could ever resume my life in Mem Helena's bungalow, or live if I didn't. I didn't see how I could face David now that he knew how I felt about him. It was only in the late afternoon when I picked myself up

to trudge to the kampong, a refuge in this disaster, that I realized I'd never spoken the word 'love' to David.

The next day I awoke feeling heavy and sad, and although I started out for the bungalow I didn't want to see Mem Helena. Without really thinking, I went up to the Catholic church instead, walking slowly, absently pulling at a leaf here and there. But when I reached the church, I discovered I wasn't alone, as I'd expected. Mariammah sat in the doorway, hugging her knees. Had it been anyone else, I would have gone away, but somehow Mariammah seemed just the person to bring me back into perspective. I went up to her and she smiled at me. Wordlessly, I seated myself in the doorway opposite her. We each leaned back against the wooden frame.

Down below us, on the Government road, the morning traffic crawled by: the rickety red bus that connected the village to the town; the Land-Rovers of the planters, or of Telecoms; the latex and timber lorries; the tractors of the Public Works Department, heavy powerful machinery compared to the tinny toy tractors used on the estate; ancient Chevs belonging, as a rule, to some contractor who transported his labour in it, their chongkuls sticking out in all directions so that the car looked like a porcupine. Small English and Italian cars, and now and then the long, low American car of some wealthy Chinese with two fat embroidered cushions in the rear window.

The morning was cool and peaceful. Mariammah didn't talk. She just watched the road and dreamed on, and I began to feel better, less torn up inside. My mind stopped churning and that sensation of having been badly whipped receded slowly.

Beside me, Mariammah reached out and plucked a fern leaf growing near the doorway, a leaf green on one side and powdery white on the other. She laid it flat along her arm, powder-side down, pressed it hard and then peeled it off. Like a perfect tattoo, the intricate white design of the fern appeared in detail against the blackness of her skin.

Then she plucked another leaf and handed it to me. I did the same, but when I peeled it off the white hardly showed up against the pale saffron of my skin.

'We used to do that as children,' Mariammah commented. 'We decorated our arms and legs and faces, but as soon as one moves a bit the powder flies off.'

The simple game further helped restore me to some semblance of normality and when Mariammah got up to return to her chores in Ken's bungalow, I got up, too, and headed for Mem Helena's.

When I arrived, Mem Helena was just getting the car out. I always thought of the car as the 'picnic-car,' because it was the one we had used that day. It was a small Morris Minor and the top was down. She called to me to hop in, she was driving down to the office to collect the mail. This was the day the American magazines arrived and the books from the Kuala Lumpur book club. Around her feet, the two small black dogs pranced and jumped, and when I opened the door of the car they bounded inside. They were car-mad and accompanied Mem Helena on any local errand, standing up by the door, their noses stuck as far out as possible, looking ahead, for all the world like back-seat drivers.

The little dogs always made me smile, for although full-grown they were no bigger than our pye-puppies. They were frolicsome and alert and soft and cuddly, like toys, and now I sat in the car and fondled their ears and stroked the silky sleek fur of their chests. I sat in the car while Mem Helena picked up the mail, and when she came back with it, instead of starting off for home, she showed me the latest magazines and rifled through the letters, not opening them, but saying this one was from that person, and So-and-So would appreciate the stamps on the envelope. Around us, the tappers were bringing in their latex buckets to the weighing station beside the office, an arrangement that made for considerable congestion. The latex buckets stood in irregular pairs on the ground waiting their turn to be weighed.

It will take longer to tell than it took to happen, it was all over in a minute.

A latex lorry was coming down the road towards us, the two little black dogs decided to jump out of the car and chase each other around the buckets. The manager stepped out of his office, and behind us Ah Fan with his syce and his great lumbering new Labrador puppy drove up in the Jaguar. That was the picture, nothing unusual about it – tappers, dogs, lorry, two cars and the manager, and Mem Helena and me. The sun shone, the tappers shouted jokes to each other, they were always in a good humour once the crop was in. It meant assured pay.

Then one of the little black dogs knocked against a latex bucket and spilled a few drops. The tappers laughed. It was an insignificant incident, but the manager decided on a tantrum. He roared abuse at the dogs and then, just as his own big puppy leaped from Ah Fan's grasp and came bounding up to him, he kicked at one of the small dogs, caught it neatly under the belly and sent it hurling straight under the wheels of the oncoming latex lorry.

As the lorry passed over the dog with a squeal of brakes, the Labrador puppy went wild with joy at seeing its master, and jumped around the latex buckets, spilling two or three, and then putting his dripping, gluey, latex-covered paws on the manager's shoulders. The tappers whose buckets had been spilled yelled in anger, the manager bellowed with laughter at his Labrador's affection, and the lorry-driver got down from his cab and held out to Mem Helena her dead dog. It was a nightmare.

Mem Helena said something to the driver, told him to bury the dog, I imagine, as she pointed towards the rubber, and he nodded and went off with it. She whistled for the other black dog, and when it jumped into the car I grabbed it and held it for comfort. Without a word to the manager, Mem Helena got behind the wheel and drove off, her face ashen and two slow tears rolling down her cheeks.

We parked the car in the garage without speaking.

gathered up the mail, and just as we entered the lounge we heard the Jaguar change into gear to mount the hill. As if under orders, we both stood still, our arms filled with books, mail, and magazines, and the other black dog at our feet.

It was the manager, driving his own car and alone. He slammed the door of the car and stepped into the lounge, red-faced and his shirt wet through with perspiration.

'For God's sake, Helena, I'm sorry,' he said. 'I didn't mean to kill your little dog. I don't go around kicking dogs under lorry wheels. It was an accident.'

'It was an accident,' Mem Helena echoed in a flat voice.

He ran his fingers through his disordered black hair and scratched the back of his neck and then said, 'I'll get you another dog. For God's sake, stop looking at me like that.'

He was so disturbed, I doubt he even saw me. He ignored me completely. Mem Helena said nothing, just stood, her hands tightening over the books, pressing them to her bosom.

'Listen, Helena. You probably won't believe me, but I'll try to explain.' The manager shook his head and drops of sweat flew from his face in a miniature shower. He spoke slowly and quietly which was rare for him, and while he spoke he kept glancing at Mem Helena and then looking down at the rug. 'In Siam, in the camp, we had rats,' he said. 'Some people have a phobia about spiders or snakes. With me, it's rats. We lay on boards at night and the rats scuffled about underneath. We hung our clothes, our rags they were, from the cross beams and the rats slept in the folds. They nested in our shoes. They crossed our faces and chests when we were sleeping. They were everywhere. I hate rats, I can't control myself with rats.' He grimaced, and then said gruffly, 'My control isn't anyway one of my best traits. Well, your little dogs are the size of those Siam rats. When I saw those black dogs among the latex buckets, I thought they were rats. Naturally I *knew* they were only your little dogs, but I

reacted as if they'd been rats, because that's what I thought they were. I didn't mean to kick the dog. It was, what do you call it, a reflex action. I'm very sorry about it, Helena.'

'Yes,' Mem Helena said and now she moved, laying the books on her desk. 'It's happened, it's over. Let's not speak about it any more.'

'Will you accept a new dog?' he asked, and sounded anxious.

'Certainly,' Mem Helena answered. 'The children are accustomed to having two dogs around.'

'Well, I'll see if I can get one quickly and then you needn't tell your son what happened, not until there's the replacement dog. And now, how about a drink? I could do with one.'

Mem Helena turned to me and I understood she didn't want to serve him, so I crossed to the bar and poured whisky-ayers for both of them and an orangeade for me.

The manager's Mem, years ago, had a saying that it was an ill wind that blew no good. There was some good in the incident. It so disturbed Mem Helena that she didn't question me about yesterday's behaviour, and it enabled me to re-establish contact with her. So long as David wasn't about, so long as something was *happening*, I couldn't hate her or resent her. She was again the Mem Helena I loved.

That day was memorable not only because of the death of the little black dog, but also because it was the day the Kelantan men came to the village.

In the afternoon Mem Helena and I walked down to the coffee-shop. She was still wrought-up and wanted to walk off her nerves. When we entered the shop, with Soo Song Hong bowing and shrieking – as is the Chinese way – for cake and coffee for us, we saw that strangers were there, four men, and we knew they came from Kelantan because of their turbans. Although they were Malays, they wore turbans in the Siamese style. They were chatting quietly and drinking coffee, but I could tell from Soo Song Hong's flutterings that he wasn't at all pleased with their presence.

Little did he know he would have to put up with them for several weeks.

Mem Helena said they looked 'picturesque', and she'd try to paint them from memory. Then she asked me if I thought they'd be wearing their hatchets, and we both examined them but could find no trace of a weapon, which meant nothing, for the Kelantan hatchets are so small they can be wrapped in the folds around the waist of a sarong.

As I didn't want to see David for the sunset drink, I went on to the kampong and Mem Helena returned alone to her bungalow. My father was home and I told him about the Kelantan men. They served as a good excuse to talk to my father about something, for lately I'd had little to say to him.

He already knew about the men. In fact he and the Imam had discussed the probable reason for such exotic strangers showing up in the village. Apparently the men claimed they were stranded and in search of temporary work to earn money to return north to their east-coast home. They said they had been promised work in Johore, but when they got there, the job fell through.

It was the Imam's opinion these men were professional assassins, had been hired for a Johore murder, and then something had gone wrong – possibly the intended victim disappeared – and the men were jobless. They could always get temporary employment on the estate weeding gangs. Weeding was never popular and weeders were in constant demand, and, of course, as Malays we would give them a place in our kampong where they could live.

'We Malays are one people and we must help each other,' my father said, and then sighed. 'But they make me uneasy, those Kelantan men. It's the turbans.'

At the time it never occurred to me that I would have anything to do with the four men – three young men and an elderly man, obviously their leader. But then, one never can foresee the future.

FIVE

THE next day I never got to Mem Helena's bungalow at all because, as I passed through the village, Soo Song Hong told me Ah Fan had phoned him and left a message for me to go up to the manager's bungalow.

Because it was Ah Fan and not the manager who wanted me, I entered the bungalow from the kitchen side and, not finding Ah Fan there, went on to the dining-room, where I found her with one of the Chinese contractors. She was talking Hokkien, which she didn't know I understood, so never bothered to stop talking. She waved a hand at me and pointed at the big white refrigerator which stood in a corner of the room and invited me to help myself to a cool drink. Whenever Ah Fan gives anything away, even a Coco-Cola, it means she wants something.

I poured out an orangeade and put ice cubes in it, and all the while Ah Fan went on with her haggles.

'Two cases of whisky,' she was insisting, 'one for the manager and one for me to sell.' She held up an admonishing hand. 'Trust me. I'll get you forty cents more per chain.' It was the contractor whose labour dug drains. 'Otherwise,' she shrugged expressively.

They began to argue. The Chinese are so money-conscious that every transaction is cause for endless discussion, counter-proposal, compromise and then a rehash of everything. I wandered out of the room, bored, and into the lounge, and there I stopped. It was half-past nine in the morning and I never thought to find the manager at home. He sat in a bamboo easy-chair, his back towards me, and the Labrador puppy lying on the floor beside him. One lax hand was curled around a whisky glass on the pahit table, his head was sunk forward and I thought he had fallen asleep.

Suddenly he jerked up his head and said in a loud voice. 'I'm the big cheese around here, and don't you forget it. Anything I say on this estate *goes*. I'm the best bloody planter in the whole damned company and no London director is going to criticize *me*. I got three thousand people depending on me.' His voice rose and the puppy woke up and scrambled uncertainly to its feet. 'My word is law. I can make or break whom I choose. I've got *power*. By God, you can bet I'm the big cheese!' The puppy circled the chair and put its big head in the manager's lap and he scratched the dog's ears. 'The big cheese!' he shouted. 'The big cheese!'

I turned and ran from the room, soundlessly, for I was barefoot as always in the bungalow. The manager talking to his dog about his power all alone in the lounge of his bungalow while his keep bargained in the next room, was a sight that made me feel decidedly uncomfortable. It looked lunatic.

Back in the dining-room, they were still at it.

'Certainly you can afford it at forty cents extra the chain,' Ah Fan insisted, 'and still make a good profit. Furthermore, if you can't, there's no point in dealing with you. The company doesn't want the manager to deal with you; you've been declared bankrupt. Did you think I didn't know? The only reason the manager deals with you is because I tell him to.'

'Bankrupt?' The contractor threw back his head and laughed. 'The company don't want Old Belly to deal with me? Then I just ask one of my business friends whom the company approves of to lend me his name and do the deal that way.'

Ah Fan smiled at that and changed her tactics.

'The whisky isn't important; for me, I mean,' she said, and spread her hands deprecatingly.

'I've always wondered who you sell it to,' the contractor observed.

'Why to the junior assistants, of course,' Ah Fan answered readily. 'For fifty cents less than it would cost

them in the village. They think I'm wonderful, so generous.' The contractor snorted and looked away, and Ah Fan bent towards him earnestly and said clearly, 'There's a building contract going shortly. Have you an interested ...' she paused significantly, 'business friend?'

'Just what is it you want, Ah Fan?' the contractor asked warily.

'A house,' Ah Fan said calmly. 'Whoever gets the nice fat building contract builds me a house. Not a big house, a small house. I already have the land.'

'Who *gave* you that?' the contractor asked rudely.

'None of your concern. I also have the furniture, a bathroom and a kerosene stove and a foam-rubber mattress. all your ... friend ... need do is build a three-room house for me with a shelf for the foam-rubber mattresses and in-built closets like in Mem Helena's bungalow, and connect up the plumbing and kitchen pipes. I have it all worked out.'

'Now, look, Ah Fan, a case of whisky or even two or three is one thing and a house is another,' the contractor began. But she cut him short. 'And so is digging drains and building.'

'Are you never afraid of being found out?'

'Who's to find me out?' Ah Fan retorted.

'Tuan Ian might object to my ... friend's ... figures. Say they're too high. Tuan Ian *looks* at figures.'

'If he objects, so much the better,' Ah Fan assured him. 'No matter *what* Tuan Ian says, Old Belly will go against him. If Tuan Ian says the building costs are high, you're made. Old Belly will insist they're low. It's like that when one white man hates another.'

'What if the agents - ?'

'So long as the company approves, what do they care?' Ah Fan asked rhetorically, and he nodded his head. 'A wooden house,' she went on, 'raised from the ground for coolness and with a tile roof. None of your tin to send me crazy when it rains, like a thousand drums inside my head.'

‘Suppose the company decides to investigate?’

‘Let them,’ Ah Fan said, with a malicious laugh. ‘Do you think one of *us* would confess to what *we* do? Why should we?’

‘They might attempt bribery,’ the contractor said thoughtfully.

‘They could bribe us *once* only for the information we have to give. But Old Belly goes on year after year. Shall we kill the hen that gives us such fine eggs? Are we fools? We’ll swear Old Belly is as honest and pure as the day his mother bore him. Furthermore, what he doesn’t know about, he can’t be guilty of, can he?’ Ah Fan leaned back in her chair with satisfaction. Her points were well taken and her argument flawless.

‘Ah Fan, sometimes I think you go too far. A whole house you want me to produce without Old Belly knowing it and still letting my – friend – make a profit over and above the cases of whisky Old Belly will expect.’

‘I don’t go far enough,’ Ah Fan retorted. ‘I’ve given him the best years of my life and he’s such a miser he’d throw me out when he retires back to Glasgow. That’s why I have to look after my own interests. I need security, I can’t bank on *him* for it. He’s never played fair with anyone, why should I be the exception? The house won’t be costly,’ she said in her wheedling tone. ‘One person doesn’t need much room. It’s good land, right near the road, a small plot overlooking the beach.’

‘What are you planning? A beach-stand for fruit drinks and sweetcakes?’ the contractor asked idly.

‘What *you* don’t know won’t hurt *you*, either,’ Ah Fan snapped, and it was obvious he had hit upon her intentions. He had a final objection.

‘The other contractors, they’re not Chinese. Perhaps the company might persuade *them* to talk.’

‘The Asian who can’t twist the white man around his little finger has yet to be born,’ Ah Fan answered haughtily. ‘Let the company spend its money trying to find out something from *us*!’ She laughed at the absurdity of it. ‘And

even if Old Belly *suspects*, why should he investigate? He'd only make a fool of himself if he unearthed anything. Why should he show himself up as either negligent or blind? Fool he is, but not an idiot.'

The contractor stared moodily at Ah Fan, revolving her words in his mind.

'All right,' he capitulated, 'I'll speak to my friend. Then we'll meet in the village, and then you see to it he gets the contract. No contract, no house.'

Ah Fan smiled and said lightly, between her teeth,

'I want that house. Your friend builds it and the contract is his.'

'Very well,' the contractor agreed, and rose to go, but she detained him.

'Now about the drains,' she said, matter-of-factly. 'That's not quite settled yet.'

I admired her persistence, her single-minded pursuit for the extra dollar. But in her haggling she had squirmed and wriggled so much in her chair that a silk handkerchief fell to the ground and the contractor picked it up, was about to hand it to her and then flicked it open. It was covered with cabalistic signs. She snatched at it and he withdrew it from her reach, plainly waiting for her explanation.

'It's a charm,' she said reluctantly. 'I put it on Old Belly's head when he sleeps, and it gives me the power to make him do what I want.' She reached out for the bit of cloth and he gave it to her, a mocking but understanding smile on his lips. The Chinese are great believers in charms and I understood at once how valuable that bit of handkerchief was to Ah Fan. 'Now,' she said briskly, 'about those drains.'

It went on for another half-hour and Ah Fan got her two gratis cases of whisky and the contractor worked her up to forty-five cents a chain more. They parted on good terms and then Ah Fan turned her attention to me.

'Zainah, I'm glad you could come so soon,' she said, and her voice was as sweet as she could make it, so I

waited for her to ask me for a favour. 'Are you very busy at Mem Helena's or can you be borrowed for a few days?' When I didn't reply, she said, 'I'll pay you a dollar a day more than Mem Helena does.' I still waited for things to be made clearer and she said, 'It's only for a day, or two or three. A London director is visiting the estate and it's important for us,' and she nodded towards the lounge, 'that he be properly entertained. Can you show me what to cook for him? And will you serve the drinks? And translate for me what they say?'

As I'm not interested in money, ordinarily I would have accepted her offer, but if one doesn't bargain with a Chinese, they think you a fool so I began my counter-offer. Actually the arrangement suited me well, for it gave me a legitimate excuse to absent myself from Mem Helena's bungalow without creating a situation, and of course I wouldn't see David at all unless the manager gave one of his stiff European assistants' cocktail parties where nobody spoke much and everyone was relieved when it was over.

I suggested to Ah Fan that a London man would enjoy a change of food and to give him a good mahmee, and if he stayed for two nights, prawns fried in egg batter and mashed potatoes and lots of our local fruit, all peeled and prepared for him and strong tea. For tiffin, omelets and black mushrooms, and for breakfast the essential fried eggs and sausages that seem so necessary to the British stomach. This was polite camouflage. Ah Fan had no interest in the feeding of the London director and every interest in knowing what was spoken about. She wanted me for reporting to her.

There was a panic of cleaning and polishing. The guest bedroom was aired and Ah Fan asked me to place flowers around the house and to set the tea-table in the lounge for a high tea. The London director arrived, a small, tired man carrying a heavy black brief-case. He pecked at the tea sandwiches and cakes and then retired to work on papers in the guest-room. Tuan Ian and Mem Helena, David and

Ken had been invited for seven o'clock drinks at the bungalow for which I prepared makan kecil. It was the first time I'd seen David since I'd run away from the bungalow.

While I served drinks and then passed around the trays of assorted canapés, the conversation jerked from topic to topic mostly connected with rubber. Then, to my surprise, the London director turned to the manager and asked what exactly was this experiment with budwood that had been so successful, and the manager proceeded to detail Tuan Ian's process as if it were his own. He referred to it as 'my idea', and constantly said 'I did this' and 'I did that' and 'I discovered'. We stared at him as if mesmerized, it looked as if we were hanging on to his every word and hearing about the experiment for the first time when, in reality, we were horrified to hear him claim Tuan Ian's work as his own.

The London director was pleased and impressed.

'Of course,' the manager said off-handedly, 'my senior assistant here was quite helpful.'

'Quite helpful.' It was Mem Helena's voice, cold and sarcastic. She put her glass down with careful deliberation and then stood up, smoothing out her dress. Tuan Ian also stood up and then David and, last, Ken. 'I do not drink with thieves,' Mem Helena said with peculiar distinctness. 'Good evening.'

'Now, Helena, what's got into you?' the manager demanded in his joking tone.

'Good night,' Tuan Ian said, with a slight inclination of his head to each of the senior men.

David echoed him and then Ken, bewildered but loyal, did likewise and, in a group, they left the bungalow.

'What was the meaning of that?' the London director asked. 'What did she mean by that remark about thieves.'

I was collecting the glasses and could see Ah Fan peeking around the corner, avid for information. I collected each glass individually, it was the slowest way I could think of.

'I'm glad it happened,' the manager said; 'now you can

see for yourself what I have to put up with. My assistants hang together. They've formed a Soviet against me.' He sighed in self-pity. 'They're a jealous, cliquey bunch, cocky youngsters, too big for their boots. They cannot stand seeing an older man come out with an original idea like this budwood thing. They think they're the only bright ones, and the truth is I've forgotten more about planting than they'll ever learn.'

'But the remark about thieves?'

'You know what women are,' the manager returned easily, 'always pushing their husbands forward, determined to take credit for everything.'

'She didn't strike me as a pushy sort at all,' the director said thoughtfully.

'You never can tell with those Dutchies. Her husband is the ring-leader. He incites every new assistant to work against me, sheer bloody-mindedness combined with a power-complex. A dangerous man.' Suddenly the manager remembered me. 'Get some more ice, Zainah,' he ordered, and I had to leave the room. When I returned they were talking of their favourite pubs along Piccadilly and Shaftesbury Avenue.

Very obviously the manager told the visiting director that I understood English, for after that, whenever I served at table or poured tea or passed a drink, they either fell silent or talked trivia. I told Ah Fan what I had heard and her one concern was that the director should be convinced of the manager's truthfulness. That would mean either a continuation of the status quo or a betterment. She wanted only to maintain her present position; it improved automatically every year.

I wondered a lot about that incident. Of course if Tuan Ian had claimed his work, there was no proof, just his word and that of the junior assistants against the manager's, so it was a waste of breath. Walking out had been the most effective way of dealing with the theft. It was simply something I never should have thought of doing. I think what also hurt me was David's immediate display of

solidarity with Mem Helena, for he was on his feet almost as soon as Tuan Ian that evening when they had all stood up at once to leave. Without him, I doubted Ken would have stood up. He had been the decisive factor in the walk-out.

The white man has a saying that everything always happens in duplicate. If you see a white goose in the morning in the rubber where it shouldn't be, you're sure to see another one there before evening. In the same way, right after I had translated the director's visit for Ah Fan, I was again asked to translate. This time by Fatimah.

If my childhood friend, Fatimah, had been married to an S.C. stationed anywhere except on duty at David's bungalow, I would not have maintained such close contact with her. I visited her solely to find out what David was doing. That was how I was able to witness Yoke Chan's return.

Not that her return was any secret; far from it. I heard the roar of her car as she turned into the estate road. I was in the coffee-shop at the time, and had no trouble in identifying the sound. I'd heard it so often. My first thought was that Mem Helena, up in the bungalow, would also be hearing it, and my second thought was why was she back? It was almost half-past five, and Yoke Chan knew the estate routine and David's habits well enough to realize he would now be returning from the office for his shower and change of clothes and the evening's sunset drink on Mem Helena's terrace. But it wasn't a good evening for sunsets. The day had been grey and overcast and muggy and perhaps David would stay at home, drinking beer and reading a detective story. The close, hot day was much more tiring than a dry sunny one.

I had supper with my family that evening – we always ate early in the fading daylight – after which my father and the Imam liked to sit under the causerina by our house and talk, or else stroll to the village for a fruit crush. I chatted to my sisters for a time, but we had so little in common that it was a polite effort on both sides. When I

rose and walked down the steps, my youngest sister called out to me, not in envy or anger as formerly, but as if establishing a fact: 'I suppose you're off to the bungalow?'

She meant Mem Helena's bungalow, but I answered with David's bungalow in mind, 'Yes, to the bungalow.'

I knew there would be no check on my movements. There never had been since those far-away days when first I was transported daily to the manager's bungalow in the armoured Ford. Once a pattern is established, I've found people rarely question it. In fact, they're disturbed if it's not followed.

By the time I reached David's place it was dark. From the harsh light streaming through his open windows, I saw Yoke Chan's fast little sports car parked boldly in the driveway. Circling the bungalow, I sauntered casually up to the S.C. quarters, where the men were playing cards by the light of a kerosene lamp and the women were grouped together in Fatimah's doorway which afforded an excellent view into David's lounge. Fatimah spoke no English, and when she saw me she sprang up and called out in a delighted, low voice, 'Zainah! Come join us, we need you badly!'

She giggled and drew me by the arm into the group where the women made room for me and I sat down in their midst, my Malay world enfolding me as easily as if I'd never left it. 'Tell us what they're saying in there, translate for us. One can hear as plainly as if we were in the room with them, but none of us has any idea what it's about!'

In this world of little diversion, Yoke Chan's visit was a great event, to be looked on as a stage show and discussed for weeks; much more exciting than any radio programme, which was the only other diversion except for the very occasional Malay film shown in the local village cinema hall. Furthermore, this was exactly the purpose of my visit, so I was most willing to oblige them.

'Tell us when it gets interesting,' Fatimah's husband

called softly across to me as he expertly flipped a card down on the earth floor.

Yoke Chan was walking up and down the lounge, smoking. She wore a scarlet brocade cheongsam and her black braids shone like macadam on a wet night, glinting under the unshaded electric bulb that hung, pendulous and obscene, in the centre of the room. David was stretched out on one of the armchairs, the pillow from his bed stuffed behind his back. He held a pipe in one hand and the ankle of one leg rested on the knee of the other, and with his other hand he was absently scratching it. He wore a fresh white shirt, open-necked, and had wrapped a green and cherry checked sarong around his hips. On his feet were the cheap local sandals we all wore, rubber flip-flops with black velvet straps across the front part of the foot, equally beloved of Malay, Chinese, Indian and European. He looked handsome and I blushed slowly in the dark as I examined him.

'Fine pair, aren't they?' Fatimah said in my ear, as if she were talking of matched bullocks. 'He's so male and she such a beautiful whore.'

'Why should I blackmail you?' Yoke Chan suddenly asked, coming to a standstill before David. 'The whole estate knows about you and Helena, the whole estate except her husband who is too overworked and the manager who is too drunk to know what's happening around him unless Ah Fan tells him.'

'What is it *but* blackmail when you want money in a hurry and threaten me with all sorts of dire consequences – which you know I don't believe in – if I don't give it to you?' David asked. 'Since when are *you* short of money? What do you spend it all on?'

I whispered the gist of this to Fatimah, who passed it on to the other women. We all stared at the lighted lounge, fascinated, absorbed, intrigued, the others in a totally impersonal way and me with a fierce concentration that was most personal indeed.

Yoke Chan began pacing the room again, twisting her

hands together and a cigarette dangling from her lips. This wringing of her hands was the first gesture of discomposure I had ever seen her make. She threw her cigarette out of the window and immediately helped herself to another from David's tin of Player's. Her hand, as she lit it, was steady enough. She came back to where she had been standing and, with one hand negligently on her hip, the other holding the cigarette, and with her body slightly bent in a professional model's pose, she stared down at David and said quite clearly, 'I want it for my brother.'

'For your *brother*?' David echoed. 'I didn't know you *had* a brother! What has he done that he needs so much money in a hurry?'

The men had stopped playing cards and stood behind us.

'He's come out from inside,' Yoke Chan said slowly, not taking her eyes from David's face. 'He's quit. He's through with them. But he hasn't surrendered, you understand. He's afraid they'll find him, they or their agents, and kill him. He wants to leave the country. He needs papers, passport, a new identity, and I can get them for him, but I have to pay.'

'From inside? Quit? Who's he through with?' David asked, and suddenly sat bolt upright. 'My God, Yoke Chan! You don't mean to tell me that your brother's a bandit?'

While she nodded, I gave this information to Fatimah, and her husband growled behind me, 'They're all alike, those Chinese. If they're not terrorists themselves, their brothers are, or their uncles and cousins. The only good Chinese are dead ones.'

'I'll be damned if I'll help a Communist terrorist!' David shouted angrily. 'Even an ex-one!'

'That's what I thought,' Yoke Chan said in a patient voice. 'But David, you don't have much choice. There's a director of your company out here. He visited this estate a few days ago and the agents have been giving him a tour of Kuala Lumpur.'

'How do you know that?' David asked swiftly. 'And

what's the connection between you and a company director and me?'

'I can make sure you lose your job,' Yoke Chan said with calm confidence. 'I need only tell *him* about you and Helena and you're through here, David, through here and with the company and with no chit of recommendation for a job with another company. You'll leave the country and never see Helena again.'

'How can *you* tell *him*?' David asked. He sounded amused.

'I figured in your director's tour of Kuala Lumpur,' Yoke Chan said. 'I've become quite an important part of it.' I thought of the quiet small man with the large black brief-case, and how exotic Yoke Chan must seem to him and how convenient her command of English. 'In fact,' Yoke Chan stuck out her arm on which was a wide and costly gold bracelet, 'your director is making sure I don't forget him and you may be certain I'm making sure *he* doesn't forget *me*. He's a very useful man.'

David said nothing and Fatimah whispered excitedly, demanding to know what was happening. When I told her she squeezed me in delight. It was without doubt the best entertainment any of them had had for months.

'Tell me one thing,' David said in a speculative voice, and with a sudden movement, almost like a collapse, Yoke Chan sat down in the straight-backed desk chair, 'tell me one thing. Whatever made *your* brother become a terrorist?'

'What a fool question,' Fatimah's husband said scornfully when I translated. 'He's Chinese, isn't he?'

'The same thing,' Yoke Chan answered, 'that made me become a model and aim to be a movie star. A sense of adventure.'

'But surely your brother must have sympathized with the Communists?' David insisted.

'My brother never cared about politics,' Yoke Chan told him, shaking her head. 'He's not one of those fanatic, dedicated Communists. Far from it. He went inside when

he was still just a kid because the whole idea of it appealed to him, living in military camps in the jungle, attacking the British imperialists, making Malaya the property of the people of the country, especially the Chinese of the country. And then came Merdeka.' She spread her hands and shrugged. 'There were no imperialists any more to fight, the jungle camps and army-life had disintegrated, many of the bandit-leaders surrendered, the terrorists had to live in small roving groups without any comforts and in constant search for food. The main problem no longer was murdering British planters and slashing British-owned rubber trees. The government made it quite clear it was deeply indebted to British planting and to British rubber research and wanted the British companies to continue. Not only the British but all foreign capital, American, Danish, French. The main problem was just keeping alive and out of the hands of the military or the police.'

'The government's promised amnesty to the bandits,' David inserted quickly. 'Why doesn't he take advantage of the offer?'

'You don't understand,' Yoke Chan said, a note of irritation in her voice. 'He's afraid.'

'What of?' David sounded puzzled.

'Of *them*,' Yoke Chan answered. 'Of the Communists. He's afraid of reprisals. He's afraid of the day when the Communist agents from China hunt out all surrendered bandits and murder them. He wants a totally new identity, a new life, a new country. He's finished with adventure. He's older.' She stopped abruptly.

When I translated, Fatimah's husband spat on the floor and said, 'Finished with adventure! Finished with terrorizing villagers and torturing and murder! He calls that "adventure"?''

'Why doesn't he go back to the family?' David inquired. 'You Chinese are like the Jews when it comes to family feeling. You stick together like glue.'

'The family!' Yoke Chan stood up abruptly. 'We're renegades from the family. My great-grandfather was a

Capitan China. He helped make Kuala Lumpur what it is today. My family is a proud one. When my brother went inside, they disowned him. And when I took a job and then started escorting men, they disowned me, too. Disowning one's children isn't just a western habit.' She sounded bitter and resentful.

'I'd have disowned the brother, too,' Fatimah's husband commented, when I explained what Yoke Chan had said. 'A criminal. Who wants criminals in the family?'

'Couldn't you repent?' David suggested. 'And be accepted back into the family bosom?'

'I told you,' Yoke Chan said stiffly. 'We're a proud family, every one of us. My brother and I would never do that.'

'Where are you sending your brother for his new life?' David asked.

'To San Francisco,' Yoke Chan answered, after a slight pause. 'I have a friend who knows how to get him in as a returning resident.'

'What happened to the real returning resident?' David asked.

I was translating into Malay as rapidly as the English was spoken, and Fatimah and the other women were pressed against me in excited curiosity with their husbands right behind them, anxious to miss nothing.

'He's dead,' Yoke Chan said flatly.

'I suppose he died conveniently in Kuala Lumpur?' David's tone was just faintly sarcastic, but not impertinent.

'In Singapore,' Yoke Chan corrected, grudgingly. 'Those things are easier to arrange in Singapore. No Malay officialdom to trip one up, everything important is in Chinese hands.'

'That's where all Chinese should be,' Fatimah's husband observed grimly. 'And we want no part of Singapore.'

'Your brother speaks English?' David asked.

'As well as I do,' Yoke Chan said soberly. 'That was one of the considerations in choosing San Francisco.'

‘What sort of accent does he have?’

‘Nothing identifiable,’ Yoke Chan answered. ‘And nothing *English!*’ She waited and then stood up again before David. ‘Three thousand dollars isn’t much to *you*. Make it out to me as a cheque and I’ll have it deposited in my brother’s California bank account. It’s very simple.’ Again Yoke Chan paused. ‘It’s not much to pay for the privilege of being with Helena, is it?’ she asked.

David got up, a slow, deliberate movement, and went to the desk to rummage through the drawers until he found his American cheque-book. He remained standing while he wrote out the cheque, and then handed it in silence to Yoke Chan with an ironic bow. It was an awkward moment. Yoke Chan was plainly relieved and David looked withdrawn and hard. Yoke Chan folded the cheque into a strip and stuck it into her hair.

Next to me Fatimah sucked in her breath and held it because, without warning, Yoke Chan tore at the neck of her cheongsam, the snaps flew open and the dress fell to her ankles leaving her naked before David. She stretched her arms towards him and cried out, ‘David! David! Make me stop *thinking!* I’ve planned and schemed and arranged so much for this San Francisco thing that I feel I’m losing my sanity! Take me, David!’ she implored. ‘Take me to bed with you and make me stop thinking, *the way I used to make you stop thinking about Helena!*’

Next to me, Fatimah tugged at my baju.

‘What is she saying, Zainah, what is she saying?’ she asked hoarsely, but I didn’t want to translate that, so I said Yoke Chan was throwing herself into the price paid for her brother’s new life, part of the deal, as it were. I was amazed that my voice was as light and even as it was, for within me I was in torment.

When David picked up Yoke Chan and carried her to the unlit bedroom, her cheongsam caught on one foot and trailed behind them; I turned my eyes away and my breath came in gasps and I felt the hot tears slide down my cheeks. The others were so enthralled with the drama they

had just seen that they paid no attention to me and discussed it animatedly among themselves. Fatimah wasn't even aware when I slipped away and stumbled back to the road, where I walked up and down in the darkness until I was sufficiently composed to return to the kampong.

SIX

AH FAN never came to the kampong, so that when she appeared on the veranda the next night after supper when I was weeding the plants, I knew something was seriously wrong. I was alone at the time. My father and the Imam had gone visiting at another house in the kampong and my sisters were in the kitchen quarters. She had been running, and her ordinarily neat flowered samfu was wrinkled and sweat-soaked and her hair, which she was proud of and always kept waved and combed, was lank and dishevelled.

'He's gone mad,' she said, out of breath from her haste. 'He's walking around the room with a carbine in his hands shooting at the bats and talking to himself. Something about "tenniscots". Have you any idea what that could be?'

'Tennis courts?' I shook my head. There were two unused and rundown tennis courts on the estate, but I couldn't imagine the manager expressing any interest in them.

'Come to the bungalow with me, Zainah. I'm frightened.' Ah Fan didn't need to tell me, she looked it. 'I'll make it worth your while,' she added, and I thought even in a crisis a Chinese remembers money.

I called out to my sisters that I had to go to the manager's bungalow, and then accompanied Ah Fan through the village and on to the estate. The bungalow was blazing with lights as we approached it, and we could hear the manager's voice shouting and now and then the sharp crack of the carbine. We stood in the garden and looked in, ducking whenever the carbine swung in our direction.

'Goddamn tennis courts,' the manager yelled over and over, 'goddamn tennis courts. What does he think this is? A bloody country club?' and then suddenly, 'Ah Fan! Whisky ayer! where are you, you bloody bitch?'

Ah Fan nudged me. 'You go,' she urged. 'He won't harm *you*, but he might hit me. Pour him his drink,' and when I hesitated, once again she added, 'I'll make it worth your while, Zainah, I promise.'

I only half believed her, but I felt somebody should try to calm down the old man, and if he wasn't poured a drink soon his rage would only increase. I walked up the shallow flight of steps and into the living-room. I was more disgusted with the raving and ranting than frightened.

'Ah Fan isn't feeling well,' I said. 'She asked me to pour you your drink,' and I picked up his empty glass from the pahit table and refilled it. There was no reason why he couldn't pour his own whisky, but he was so used to having Ah Fan wait upon him that such an idea simply didn't occur to him. He looked at me indifferently and stood the carbine in a corner by the desk.

'Bloody cheek, asking for the tennis courts to be put into shape!' he said to my back as I measured out whisky, water and ice. 'Bloody cheek. "Please, sir,"' and by his mimicking tone I recognized he was imitating Ken, "'could fifty dollars be spent on the estate tennis courts to put them into shape so that we might play on them? There's no diversion at all on the estate, no sports, so that would give us something to do." Something to do! He's hired to work, not to play tennis!'

I put the drink on the pahit table by his favourite chair and he reached down for it greedily.

'I'll put a tractor to those bloody courts and plough them up and plant rubber on them. That'll be the end of this tennis court nonsense.'

He threw himself into the chair and stretched his legs and stared moodily at his toes. The Labrador puppy, now that the shooting was over, padded back into the room and flopped down beside his master's chair. I thought uneasily that things were too well under control: his rages didn't usually just peter out mildly like this and I waited for the next storm, but I never dreamed it would centre on me.

'You heard what I said!' he shouted suddenly, and I

jumped at the unexpectedness of it. He hadn't said anything. 'You were in this room. You heard what I said about Ian's budwood and you heard me call them a Soviet working against me. You heard it all, you goddamn little bitch.' He stood up and came towards me and now, frightened for the first time, I sidled to the corner by the desk and stood with the carbine hidden behind my back. Halfway towards me, he stopped and said in an altered tone of voice, almost a whine, 'Ian's young, he'll come up with other ideas, no harm done. But me, I'm too old to *think* any more. Let me tell you three things you should never forget.' He shook his head, animal-like, as if to see better. 'First, you must never get old; second there are no good Japs, the only good Japs are dead Japs; and third - ' He stopped and passed his hand over his eyes. I thought everybody had a private hate. Fatimah's husband had used the same standard phrase about the Chinese whom he hated, and there was the manager still hating the Japs because of what they did to him in Siam. I wondered who David hated. 'The third was the most important and I've forgotten it,' he said querulously.

He turned away from me and threw himself down on the settee, tugging and pulling at the cushions and setting his feet on the armrest. It was too unsteady a piece of furniture to accommodate the violence of his assault without alarming creaks of strain.

'Tell Ah Fan to come here and take my socks off,' he ordered, and without answering, I began to peel the socks off his feet. I was appalled at the sight of his feet, they were malformed and abominably scarred. He saw me looking at them and said shortly, 'The Japs worked me over. Bring me a drink. Bring the bottle, too, and the water and leave everything right here beside me. I'm going to sleep here. I'm tired of that bloody bedroom. Bloody Jap officer used it as *his* bedroom during the occupation.'

When I set the bottle on the table beside the sofa, his eyes were closed and I reached up to switch off the light.

'Leave the bloody light on,' he said. 'I don't like the

dark, never can see the bloody bastards coming at you. Ha!' and he opened his eyes and looked directly at me. 'I remember the third thing. Never be alone. I'm all alone. Nobody gives a damn if I'm dead or alive except that bitch of an Ah Fan who cares about my money and not about me. *Never be alone*. It means you're a failure as a human being. But I'm still the big cheese!' he shouted. 'I can still come up with a new idea like the budwood business for the company! I can show them I'm still bloody well essential on this bloody estate! I'm the big ...' he closed his eyes and never finished the sentence.

I waited for five minutes to make sure he was asleep, and then Ah Fan tiptoed into the room and stood beside me. 'He'll sleep it off,' she said, and then pressed a wad of notes into my hand. 'Thank you, Zainah.'

Only when I got back to the kampong and counted the sum she'd given me, did I realize I must have done her a tremendous favour in taking care of the old man.

The next day I was needed at Mem Helena's bungalow, for she was off to see the dentist in Kuala Lumpur and wanted me to look after the children and make the coffee and French toast for Tuan Ian's breakfast, and feed the little dog. Tuan Ian liked his coffee freshly made and strong, and had a special little aluminium container, cunningly fashioned, to make it in.

I sat with him while he ate and he frowned as he drank from his cup.

'Isn't it all right?' I asked. 'Haven't I made it properly?'

He stared at me, his thoughts obviously elsewhere, and then, understanding what I'd said, told me it was fine.

'I was thinking about something else. About the tennis courts, in fact.'

'What about them?' I asked, last night's scene clearly in mind.

'It's an idea of Ken's,' Tuan Ian said and sighed. 'There's nothing wrong with the idea except it's impossible. He wants to ask the old man to restore them so we

can use them, put up a little attap basha and a few cheap chairs so that we could have a meeting place. Ken thinks the assistants sponge too much on our terrace, this way it would be a place for all of us.' He shook his head. 'I've tried reasoning with him, but he says the courts are there, the company built them, why can't they be used? I tell him the old man doesn't play tennis and anything he doesn't do won't get his approval. There's sure to be a scene if Ken insists on asking him.'

'The tennis courts are to be ploughed up,' I said.

'Ploughed up? Who says so?' He was astonished. It was evidently a way of dealing with the problem that hadn't occurred to him, so I told him in detail about last night's episode. 'That's too bad,' he said when I'd finished, 'but I'm afraid he won't be satisfied with just ploughing them up. He'll want a personal revenge on Ken for suggesting a sensible idea. You'll see.'

Tuan Ian was always right about the manager's reactions, so I accepted what he said and went to the nursery while he read the morning paper. The baby was asleep and I sent the older boy outside with his building bricks. I heard Tuan Ian drive off in the Land-Rover, which sounded noisier and clankier than ever, and then – because I wanted some contact with David – I picked up the baby and nestled him in my arms. He stirred but didn't waken, and I sat down cross-legged on the floor by the crib crooning softly to him.

I don't know how long I sat there, daydreaming, but suddenly I felt I wasn't alone and, looking towards the door, I saw David standing there, watching me. It was so palpably clear what I was doing that I saw no sense in pretending I was doing anything but fondling the baby, and David, of course, knew why.

'I didn't hear you come,' I said, and rose and put the sleeping child back in the crib.

'I came on foot.'

He walked into the room and stood still, looking curiously at me, with a certain compassion.

'Mem Helena's at the dentist's in Kuala Lumpur,' I volunteered.

'Yes, I know.' There was a small child's chair near the crib and I sat down quickly in it. If he knew Mem Helena was at the dentist's why had he come? He knew by the absence of the Land-Rover that Tuan Ian wasn't home. 'I came to see *you*,' he said calmly.

He looked down at me and then, abruptly, dropped to his heels before me, seated in the peculiarly Asian position that so few white men can adopt and which is both natural and relaxing for us.

'I've been avoiding you since . . .' he hesitated, and then went on in a rush, 'Since the other day when you ran away, and I've been thinking that's not quite fair to you. I know how you feel, Zainah. I've felt that same way for a long time. Sometimes I think it's an unbearable torture to love and not have your love returned, but it becomes a steady point one gets resigned to and can live with.'

'But your love *was* returned,' I contradicted, and glanced at the sleeping baby in the bamboo crib.

He shook his head at me.

'Helena was carried away,' he said. 'The sun, the boat, the privacy and my passion. I'm afraid in a few years' time she'll come to hate me because the child will always be a reminder of an infidelity which it isn't in her nature to commit. She was carried away,' he repeated.

I was pleased that he hadn't tried to dissemble with me, hadn't denied that the baby was his.

I sat silently, looking at him, noticing with a dreadful poignancy the lines around his eyes and mouth, made from squinting in the strong sunlight. They were deeper than when I'd first met him.

'I want to make things easier for you, not more difficult. You'll get over me in time, although you don't believe it now. Tout lasse tout casse, tout passe. Do you know what that means?'

'I don't know French,' I said, more sullenly than I intended, and filed the phrase in my mind.

'It means everything palls, everything breaks and everything passes.' My hands were folded in my lap, and now he reached for them and held them in his own. 'I'll be going on leave one of these days and after that we'll never see each other again. Our worlds crossed only because we happened to meet on this estate. I'll help you make the time pass as painlessly as possible.'

Of course he spoke the truth, but the thought of not seeing David ever again once he left the estate froze my mind into an agony. Involuntarily, my hands turned over between his and I gripped his wrists.

'Suppose we go to town tonight?' he suggested quickly. 'Like old times? To the movies and then to a makan? How would you like that? A sharksfin soup and diced duck?'

I was still icy with the idea of his departure, I couldn't speak, so I merely nodded. He stood up and, because I hadn't let go of him, this brought me to my feet, too. I wanted to fling myself at him, and I think he knew it and was afraid of such a scene, for he twirled his wrists out of my grasp, stepped backwards and said lightly, 'I'll call for you at five.'

I suppose, in a sense, that evening was my most memorable one with David, the most important one. We were silent during the drive in his car, the top was down and the air soft, and he drove fast. Since I was beside him, I didn't have to think about him. I could let my mind consider other subjects.

I thought about the kampong and how I'd outgrown it. It was a narrow, limited place, safe enough as a retreat, and I used it as a wounded animal uses a convenient cave. It was somewhere to recuperate in, and as soon as I was again fit, emotionally and physically, the life of the kampong oppressed me and I was unable to breathe in it. I had to sally forth into the inviting world outside it. I'd gone too far forward to go back to the kampong. I couldn't imagine a daily duty of tapping the rubber trees, hauling home the buckets of latex, of cooking rice and chatting

day in and day out about nothing more interesting than what our neighbours were doing, which was anyway what we ourselves were doing.

The kampong had no go-aheadness. It had lived at a certain tempo for generations, and that tempo wasn't going to change. Change occurred in the towns and cities, not in the kampong, or in the village. Radios and cars and bicycles might have been added to our kampong life, but these modernities altered nothing of the basic way of the kampong social system. It's not that the kampong was indolent, as the Chinese so often maintain. It's just that its wants were small and its ambition nil (something no Chinese can understand, nor European either, for both races seem to have a money-making complex), so it worked mildly and without strain and enjoyed an insular life thoroughly. It had no curiosity about the world around it. And neither would I if the manager's Mem hadn't brought me into that world.

In town, David parked the car by the padang near the church, where he said it was least likely to suffer damage from small boys playing around it. The cinema was again a western film, but I didn't see it because, in the dark, thinking about a future without David, I began to cry. I felt for his hand, expecting he would repulse me, but he held my cold, clammy, curled-up fingers in his own, warming them. The film was *Half-way through* – the hero's palomino chasing the villain's black bay as usual – when he noticed my tears and leaned towards me and whispered, 'Would you like to go? We know it's happy ending anyway, we needn't stay.'

I got up and worked my way to the aisle, and he followed me. I knew I couldn't explain to him that part of my misery was the frustration of missing so much of what I wanted and what he represented. I was tired of the garish new movie houses in the town that imitated the larger Kuala Lumpur ones which, in turn, imitated the magnificent movie houses of New York and Chicago and Los Angeles. I was tired of erratic amateur operettas on a

school stage when I longed for the brilliance of a performance in the Paris Opera House or at Covent Garden, of which I'd seen photographs. I was tired of concerts, classical or combo and however professional, in the community hall with its bad acoustics and unflattering neon lights. I wanted the perfection I knew must exist in London's Festival Hall. I was even tired of cotton clothes, and although I've never worn fur, I longed for it. David had cultivated the tastes that Mem Helena discovered in me. I'd been exposed to their reminiscences of this performance and that opera at such and such a place. I'd listened to them talk of the glitter of first nights, of Command Performances, and now I wanted to see it all for myself, not just get it secondhand.

We walked to the car and, as I got in, David asked me where I'd like to go.

'Nowhere,' I said. I wanted to go to New York, to Florence, to Madrid. How could I say that? 'Let's sit here a minute in the dark. I don't feel like lights and people and noise.' I meant I didn't want the juke-box, the neon lighting and the Chinese faces.

It was a wonderful warm night, all velvet and diamonds, with the Southern Cross riding high, as it always did at that time of year. Near us, evening services were being held in the church and, lighted up, the familiar white wooden building looked like an illustration for a Christmas card, except there was no snow.

David lit his pipe, and I watched him, and then the words slipped out without my even thinking them beforehand.

'I wish I had never learned English! Then I never would have left the kampong. I wouldn't know anything. I wouldn't have met you. I'd be happy.'

'Where ignorance is bliss,' David quoted, puffing on the pipe to get it going, 'tis folly to be wise. But folly is the one human trait all of us cultivate.'

In the church the organist began to play, and the round limpid notes floated out clearly.

'I hope the congregation doesn't sing,' David remarked. 'I like my Handel without benefit of untrained voices.'

It was the first time I'd heard of Handel. There was so much still to learn. We listened in silence and then I said wearily, 'David, I don't think I can go on. I ache so.'

'You can go on,' he contradicted. 'I know all about aching with longing, and from extensive personal experience I can assure you one *can* go on. And I swear to you, Zainah, ten years from today I'll never cross your thoughts.'

'Is the reason I can't compete against Mem Helena because I'm a Malay kampong girl?' I asked.

'That has nothing to do with it,' David said positively. 'Malay, Chinese, French or Hottentot, I wouldn't care what my wife is. But I've got to love her as well as she loving me. There is no *reason* to all this, it's pure feeling. Look,' he went on in a gentler tone, 'would you like to go to bed with a man you didn't love, even if you liked him, feeling as you say you do about me?'

I thought quickly of Amar Singh and Sang Lee, and the thought of returning to them made me shiver.

'Exactly,' David said. 'I'm very fond of you, I'm interested in you, I like you, but I don't want an intimacy with you.'

'You didn't object to going to bed with Yoke Chan the other night,' I told him, 'when you gave her the cheque for her brother.'

He turned around in his seat and looked at me, amazed.

'How do you know about that?' he asked at last.

'I was outside. There's a perfect view into your lounge from the S.C.s' quarters and I often visit a childhood friend there, Fatimah. She's married to one of the men.'

'You were spying on me, my dear,' David said, without rancour. 'I must close the shutters on that side when I have company.'

'They'll move to the other side. *You* can't see out into the dark, but *they* can see it. And you can't close all your shutters, you'll stifle.'

'And you translated for them.' He made a statement.

'Not all of it,' I assured him. 'Only what . . . ' I left it unfinished and then said, 'Why can you be intimate with Yoke Chan and not with me?'

'I guess,' he said slowly, 'because I don't respect Yoke Chan. I treat her as a professional prostitute. I pity her and, for all her beauty, and although she amuses me and diverts me for a short time, I don't really like her.'

'Why don't you pity *me*?' I cried out. 'She doesn't even love you and I do!'

'You're not pitiable,' he answered promptly. 'You're very appealing, very competent, an intelligent adult and sensitive and loving. There's nothing about you to pity. Besides, it's a horrible thing to make love out of pity. Beware of it, it leaves one feeling soiled and ashamed.'

Again we sat in silence, and the slow, fine sonorous music took over the night. When the piece finished, David asked me where I wanted to eat.

'I don't want people,' I said uncertainly. I wanted David exclusively to myself. I wanted one of those drive-in places I'd heard so much about where a meal is brought to you in the cosiness of your own car. Suddenly I remembered the old crone with her stall where Amar Singh and I had sometimes bought fried noodles with onions and bamboo shoots and shredded chicken. 'I know a stall, a street stall, where the food is good and the cooking clean. We can eat in the car.'

I imagined the car, while I was in it with David, to be my home with him. It was a bit of fancy that gave me comfort. He looked at me in surprise and said, 'You certainly produce the unexpected. But by all means.'

He started up the engine and I directed him through the town until we drew up to the stall. I called out to the old crone who looked witch-like and remote through the vapours from her boiling-pot, and she pattered over to the car. She recognized me and sang out to her granddaughter or grandniece who was helping her, 'It's the rich one again. And in another car!' I knew David didn't under-

stand Hokkien so he wouldn't catch that allusion to 'the rich one'. I hadn't realized that was how I had been looked upon. I certainly never thought of myself in those terms.

'I've brought you a customer,' I said, smiling at her. 'Can you give us a specially good meal?'

'You speak Hokkien!' she said, stepping backwards in surprise and then, recovering herself, she chattered at me, 'A specially good meal, yes, you'll see, right away, right away,' and she bustled over to the stall and began to rattle bowls and bang pans.

'I didn't know you speak Chinese,' David said, and I caught admiration in his voice.

'Only a little. Enough to get us food. And beer if you want?'

He did and I asked the crone to send her little helper for two cold bottles.

'She seemed to recognize you,' David said. 'Have you been here often before?'

'When I worked in town, during Mem Helena's leave of absence, I came here now and then. It's cheap,' I explained.

The mouth-watering smell of the frying food enveloped us. As always, the street was dark except for the irregular line of portable food-stalls, each lit up by a bright kerosene lamp and each glowing with the cooking fires under black iron pots and frying-pans. Smoke and vapour curled around the cooks, and the air sizzled with the sound of oil and frying noodles. The subtle pungent odour of mixed spices enveloped us.

'Zainah,' David said slowly, without looking at me, 'I've been doing a lot of thinking about you. How would you like to go to England and France, to London and Paris, at my expense as a student, and see and touch all the things you've heard tell about and looked at photos of? In Paris you could learn French, meet other students, and in London it wouldn't matter what courses you took. The point would be to live there.' He turned to survey me, almost

an appraisal as if making certain I was worth the offer. 'I can easily afford it.'

In Paris with David, I thought excitedly, sitting in cafés on the boulevards, in London with David, entering the theatre on his arm, and then I remembered that David wouldn't be there. He'd be on leave in the States or Switzerland or Capri or back at work here in Malaya. Alone in strange surroundings and separated from him by thousands of miles, the offer lost its appeal.

'That's generous of you, David,' I thanked him. 'But it wouldn't work.'

'Why not? Lots of Malay girls go abroad to study.'

'Yes, that's true. But you see,' I wondered how to put it and decided on bluntness, 'you see, I'd never attend the courses you paid for and I'd use every cent you gave me to try to find you and be with you. I'd follow you to the ends of the earth.'

'Oh, Zainah, for God's sake, don't!' he brought out in a kind of groan, and looked away from me. 'A man feels such a heel when he can't tell the woman who loves him that he loves her, too. No wonder we lie so abominably to women.' He watched the crone manipulate her pots. 'I appreciate your honesty,' he said finally. 'I'm indebted to you for it.' He paused and looked earnestly at me and then said, 'You know, Zainah, I trust you implicitly. I'd trust you with my life.'

Thinking of that now, I am horrified. If only it could be unsaid.

The old woman brought us two bowls of steaming hot food, and watched us eat it, her blue cotton jacket unexpectedly bright in the light and her black sateen trousers glinting and gleaming as she moved. We sat in the car and ate with chopsticks which David handled as well as I. We had cold beer and hot towels to wipe our faces and hands when we were finished. David paid her, giving her double what the meal cost, and then said we'd drop by the club for a brandy and orange juice.

'Asians aren't welcome in the club,' I reminded him, for it was a European club and on the snobbish side.

'This is your country,' he said shortly, 'you're welcome anywhere in it.'

Even so, there were still islands of strangeness, so I prepared myself to face the disapproving looks of whatever club members would be present in the big lounge-bar, but when we got there the place was deserted and the Chinese barman dozed on a little stool behind the counter.

We perched on the bar-stools and David drank two fines. It was over the last one that David, looking at me, said in a startled tone, 'When first I met you, you were a girl. You've become a woman.'

'I became a woman before you arrived on the estate,' I said unthinkingly, and then, realizing the implication of what I'd said, I met his look and held it. Now that he knew, I hoped, irrationally enough, it would make me more accessible to him, more in Yoke Chan's category, and he would accommodate me as he had her.

'What do you know,' he said in a tone of wonderment, his eyes never leaving mine, 'I'm jealous.'

'That means you care,' I said quickly, joy and hope welling up within me.

'I care,' he admitted, nodding his head. 'Like Helena, I care. And like her, I don't care enough.'

I knew then that he would continue to treat me and to think of me as if I were still the virgin he had always presumed me to be. He signed the bar cl! it, slid off the stool and, his hand under my elbow, guided me to the car. Our ride back to the estate passed in silence. I knew David was thinking about me as he drove, and I was exhilarated because I had discovered that I meant something to David, not as much as I wanted to mean, but at least something, and there was always the chance that his feelings for me might grow.

It was ten o'clock when we drew up in front of Mem Helena's bungalow and found Ken's Land-Rover in the

driveway. The bungalow was all lighted up and when we walked in we found Tuan Ian seated at the big desk where he was preparing estimates, a tedious and demanding accounting job, and Mem Helena sewing and Ken walking up and down, shouting and waving his arms. Mem Helena raised her head and looked at me, started to say something and closed her mouth wordlessly, a queer, hurt look slipping behind her eyes. She glanced at David, then back to me and then looked down at her sewing. Too late, I realized my face reflected the pleasure of the evening. I felt glowing, radiant, alive, hopeful and confident. David, I was certain, was within my reach after all.

'For Christ's sake!' Ken was shouting, 'does he expect me to throw her out? And just like that? Why? Is the old fool getting back at me for the tennis courts? He's ploughing them up, isn't he? Isn't that enough? He's showed his power, hasn't he? Why does he have to gun for poor Mariammah? What's *she* ever done to him?' He saw us in the doorway and calmed down enough to explain. 'The old bastard has told me to chuck Mariammah out or else,' and he ran his hand across his throat.

'But why?' David asked. 'Surely he gave a reason?'

'He gave an unreason,' Ken retorted angrily. 'He claims the labour force objects to my having a Tamil keep, it offends their dignity. That's nonsense. Mariammah's on very good terms with the labour force, can't find anybody who doesn't like the girl. One can't help liking her. And Holy Jesus!' he clapped a hand to his head in bewilderment, 'the Chinese don't object to his having Ah Fan as a keep!'

'I told you,' Tuan Ian began patiently.

'Yes, yes, I *know* you told me,' he interrupted, 'but I didn't think the old man was vicious, and that's what this is, viciousness.'

'He's gone rogue,' David said quietly, and moved into the room. 'He's been too long separated from his own kind.'

SEVEN

I CALLED on Mariammah the next morning, for with the grapevine on the estate there could be no secret about the manager's ultimatum to Ken concerning her. She would already know about it. She suggested we climb up to the church and sit there, and because she seemed so attached to the place, I agreed. We wrapped a packet of cheese and some chocolate and a hard-boiled egg each in greasepaper and Mariammah brought a Thermos of ice-water. We didn't refer to what was on both our minds until we had spread our picnic before the church door and were again watching the traffic on the road below.

'It's true, isn't it?' Mariammah said. 'He'll lose his job if he doesn't get rid of me.'

'It's true,' I corroborated.

'Will he be able to get another job?' she asked anxiously.

'Oh, yes,' I told her. 'It's not as if he's been irresponsible and made you pregnant and were living with you and your child, his child. This is a usual set-up, young bachelor has a girl to look after his house for him and it's nobody's business what happens in the bungalow and nobody can prove anything. It's an accepted practice. But bachelors living with keeps and starting a local family, that doesn't go down so well. You have to be a senior planter and marry your keep to get away with that sort of thing.'

Mariammah sighed and nibbled at the hard-boiled egg. She had even remembered to bring a pinch of salt, and she dug the egg into the salt and ate it, but mechanically as if she were unaware of what she was doing.

'Where will you go?' I asked. 'I'm sure Ken will help you and I'll help you, too,' I offered.

'Ken has no money at all, he can't help me,' Mariammah said. 'He hasn't even repaid the others the money he borrowed for buying me.'

'Never mind,' I consoled, 'I have some cash and a lot of jewellery we can pawn or sell outright, much more than I need. The point is, where will you go?'

'I don't know,' she answered. She looked young and lost. 'It's happened so suddenly, I haven't had time to think. And my English was coming along so nicely!' What she really meant was her relationship with Ken was developing so nicely.

'Have you no family?' I asked, and she shook her head. She didn't need to tell me she'd never return to the old woman who had sold her just to be sold over again.

We sat for another quarter of an hour discussing and discarding possibilities and then she said she must return to the bungalow to prepare Ken's breakfast. I didn't want to face Mem Helena, not after the look on her face the evening before, so I went back to the kampong and frittered away the day in small chores.

I don't know when the idea occurred to me to go to David's bungalow at night, when the S.C.s would be asleep and he would be in bed. It just came and I didn't hesitate to put it in practice. Perhaps it had always been at the back of my mind and now finally pushed itself forward to my consciousness.

It was absurdly easy to reach David's bungalow unseen at night. I had only to wear dark clothes, stay out of the moonlight and approach his bedroom wing from the side away from the S.C. quarters. It had been over two years since any S.C. patrolled the bungalow at night, as they were supposed to, and as any day now they would be disbanded, they took things as easy as possible.

The bedroom shutters were wide open to the night air, and inside the room was the blur of the white tent that housed David's bed under the mosquito netting. I slipped soundlessly across the sill, my sandals in hand, lifted the netting and in one swift movement lay down beside him.

'Don't cry out, David,' I whispered, as he wakened and moved, and I flung an arm across his chest to prevent him from sitting up. He lay immobile, his eyes becoming

accustomed to the dark, and recognizing me, whispered back, 'What's the matter, Zainah? What's the trouble?' And then irrelevantly, 'What time is it?'

This mania always to know the time is another white man's trait that I will never understand. It is either day-time or night-time. At night-time one sleeps, so it doesn't matter what hour it is and in the day-time the sun, or the lightness of the sky if there is no sun, will tell you whether it's morning or afternoon. What does the exact time matter?

'Just after midnight,' I said, although I had no idea.

My heart hammered wildly, I was certain he must hear it, and I was at once excited and intimidated by my proximity to him. I lay on my side, pressed against him, with my head on his shoulder.

'Where are you *supposed* to be sleeping tonight?' he asked, still whispering.

'The kampong thinks I'm at Mem Helena's and Mem Helena thinks I'm at the kampong,' I answered, and added, 'as usual.'

'Why have you come?' David asked. 'What's wrong?' He lay unnaturally still, as if frozen, and his breathing was light and shallow.

'Don't be angry, David,' I pleaded, frightened now at my own boldness which had seemed so matter of course only a few minutes ago. 'Nothing's wrong.'

'Why have you come?' he repeated. He no longer whispered, but his voice was very low. He was fully awake now and was taking no risk that the S.C.s might hear.

I wanted to say it simply, but it would have sounded bald, demanding, so I phrased it in a round-about way.

'I've something to ask you.'

'Couldn't it wait until morning?'

'It could, but I couldn't,' I said. 'David, if you were alone on a desert island with me, what would happen?'

'The same thing that would happen if I were alone on a desert island with a ewe, except I dare say it'd be pleasanter with you.'

I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. It wasn't the sort of reply I expected at all. What I had intended as a great romantic gesture was becoming farce.

'Zainah, what are you trying to say?' he asked, in a careful voice.

'I'm asking you to marry me,' I said, and as he drew in his breath to speak I hurried on, 'or if you won't marry me now, take me. When you come back from your leave, you won't be anywhere near Mem Helena and you'll be lonely. Then you'll be glad to have me. Who knows you better than I do? Who loves you more?'

'My God, Zainah,' he said softly, 'what have we done to you?'

I wasn't listening although I heard him. I had more to say. 'You don't have any formal religion, so it won't be any trouble to you to become Muslim. You know I can only marry a Muslim . . . My father and the Imam,' I went on, arranging the practical aspect of the matter, 'can see to it,' and then he interrupted me.

'Stop it, Zainah,' he said sharply, 'stop it.'

I thought he would move, so I clasped my arm more firmly about his shoulders, my fingers gripping the smooth, cool flesh, his breath was on my face as mine was on his. In the darkness I saw the pale whites of his eyes. To my surprise, his hand that lay behind me came up and caressed my head, pressing it gently into his shoulder.

'It's because of what I said to you at the club.' He wasn't asking me, he was stating a fact. 'I'm a dog in the manger and you think when I'm hungry I'll stop barking and get down to eating. Child, I may be selfish and an egotist, but I have my moral code and I stick to it. I would never marry a woman I didn't love.'

'Wouldn't you marry Mem Helena if you could, even if you knew she didn't love you?' I asked, and was sure I had a minor triumph with my question.

'God forbid!' he said fervently. He still stroked my hair as if I were a kitten or a pet, a gesture of sympathy almost impersonal in touch.

With David, I knew begging would have no effect, so I tried another tactic.

‘Some day you’ll marry,’ I began again.

‘Why?’ he asked. ‘Why should I? I’m not really the marrying kind. It’s only Helena, of all the women I’ve known, whom I want to live with.’ He dropped his hand. ‘I’d live with her anywhere on any terms if she loved me. I’m not obsessed with the marriage idea. It’s women who cling to the legalities.’

I played what I thought was my ace.

‘You can’t have Mem Helena,’ I said, ‘but yet you took Virginia. You are letting her have a baby of yours. Am I not nearer you than Virginia?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘you are. And the truth about Virginia is a very usual story. She got me roaring drunk and I don’t remember a thing about it. If it weren’t for the evidence and for the fact that I know she’s a decent girl and has been going out only with me, I wouldn’t even believe it. I assure you, I shall never again permit myself to be seduced into drunkenness by a woman who has very decided designs on me. Zainah, my arm is going to sleep,’ he finished calmly.

With a quick movement, I flung myself on top of him. He was so tall that my toes reached only to just below his knees. My weight, distributed along the length of his body, wasn’t enough to cause him discomfort.

‘Your arms are free now,’ I said. I wondered if he would toss me away from him, whether I would stubbornly cling to him, whether we’d have a fight there on the bed under the white mosquito netting, but David lay still, his body warm and hard beneath my own.

‘You’ve come with a marriage proposal, Zainah,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘You aren’t the first nor the last woman who has proposed to a man. I see nothing wrong with that. But my answer is no and I’ve given you my reasons, which are entirely valid to me, if not to you.’

‘But I want you,’ I said unreasonably.

‘Yes,’ he said, and added almost absently, as if speak-

ing to himself, 'want is a terrible thing, in any field.'

I put my head on his chest, my ear lay above his heart and I heard the steady, unaccelerated beat of it. I could as well have been a child sprawled across him, or an affectionate dog. My effect on him – me, who had been so skilful in arousing passion – was nothing, nothing at all.

'David.' I said urgently, 'have you no feeling for me?'

'Oh, yes,' he answered quickly, 'a great deal. But not the feeling you want.'

'But that would grow if we were somewhere together,' I said. 'You'll probably be sent to some estate with an isolated outlying division, and we'd be together all the time. Then you'd learn to love me.'

He didn't answer right away, he seemed to be considering.

'In the canine world,' he said finally, 'there are dogs which are, all their lives, one-man dogs. In the human world, there are also men who are one-woman men. We're a rare breed, but we exist.'

'Oh,' I said bitterly, 'why couldn't it have been *me* instead of *her*?'

'My dear, I don't know. It certainly would be much easier for all of us, all the way round.'

'Then why can't you pretend,' I said, 'and make things easy for everybody?'

'Because I don't pretend. I don't know how to.'

I didn't have any answer. Then, without planning to, I inched forward and sank my lips over his. There was no response. I felt humiliation, rage and desire mingling in me.

'Will you go now, Zainah?' he asked politely. 'Otherwise I shall throw you out and that won't be a scene either of us will enjoy remembering.'

I hesitated until the last dangerous second when I felt him tense for the effort of flinging me from him, and then I slid to the floor, groped for my sandals, lifted the netting and ran across the room to the open window and slipped across the sill into the warm dark night.

I needed shelter and could return to neither of my

homes. I thought of the church and at once set out for it. There were candles on the altar and I knew where the matches were kept. For a while I sat in the doorway, staring at the shimmery ribbon of road that gleamed in the moonlight and on which nothing moved except a herd of kerbau, which had been bathing in the river and were now grazing, and then I went inside, lighted a candle and sat down behind the altar. Around me the night-noises sounded erratically, the clack of the night-jar, exactly as if someone were chopping wood near by, the frogs' chorus, the crickets' chirp, the fever bird with its piercing, irregular shrilling and, from down in the lines site, the occasional bark of a dog.

I tried to think coherently about myself, but I couldn't escape the fact that David had rejected me. He was willing to abandon me, to go away and never see me again. I tried to be composed and to weigh possibilities. I worked out a plan by which when he returned from leave I would trace him to whatever estate he was assigned to and move in with him, and then I had to abandon that because I knew David would never permit it. I wanted David, as my lover, as my husband, as my man, and I was at once heartbroken and yet furious that I was unable to persuade him to me.

The next morning I bathed in a secluded part of the river, taking my time, forcing myself to calmness, doing my hair with care, washing out my crumpled sarong and setting it to dry neatly in the hot sun so that it would look fresh. Then I went slowly to the coffee-shop and ordered cake and coffee.

The men from Kelantan were there. It was a Friday, I remembered, and they refused to work on the Muslim sabbath even though the village and estate was run on a Sunday-sabbath basis, and our kampong observed Friday evening but not the day. I greeted them and they me, but I did not join them. I stirred my coffee until it was cold and I had to order another one.

I came out of my absorption with myself and David

only when somebody tugged at my scarf and, waking to my surroundings, I saw before me the little Tamil boy whom the manager had whipped. He held a brown paper-wrapped parcel between his hands and he was smiling at me.

'Mariammah sent me,' he said. 'I knew if I couldn't find you at the kampong or the Mem's bungalow you would be here.' His eyes slid to the cake and I edged it towards him. He pushed the parcel at me, snatched the cake, thanked me hastily and ran out, as if afraid I might change my mind.

The parcel was string-wrapped and soiled where the sweat of his hands had stained it. I began to undo it, wondering what Mariammah could have sent me and why she didn't choose to give it to me personally. When I opened it, I found her few saris – all except her best one – and blouses, neatly ironed and folded, and the gold bracelet and chain Ken had given her. I looked at this collection with a growing feeling of sickness. I was tired from my sleepless night, exhausted by emotion, and my reactions were slow. Pinned to the top sari was a folded note and I tore it off, my fingers unsteady and clumsy. She had written in English. What an effort that must have been, I thought with compassion. It was short, just my name and then a line that said, 'You have these. You find me at church. I am four months' pregnant.' Then a dash and her signature. I read it through several times before I understood what it must mean and then I stood up, with a cry, and started forward to run to the church, but the coffee-shop turned black before my eyes and I pitched forward, aware only that the elderly Kelantan man had sprung up to catch me.

I lay on the floor, the note still clenched in my fist, my face damp and cool from water, the four Kelantan men squatting beside me. From a distance, gradually growing more distinct as my senses returned, I heard Soo Song Hong wailing in Hokkien, 'She should not faint in my coffee-shop! It's bad for business. I will not have people fainting in my coffee-shop!'

With an effort, I mentally formed a phrase in Kokkien and then, gathering all my strength, I shouted out, 'Shut up, you old fool!' and Soo Song Hong's lament came to an end with a yelp of surprise.

The Kelantan men helped me to my feet and I sat a few moments in my chair and sipped at the coffee. I had to go to the church and I couldn't explain to the men what I wanted or why, I hadn't the energy. I started off, groggily, and heard them clucking behind me in disapproval. In my haste I left Mariammah's parcel on the table, but they brought it to the kampong and it was waiting for me when I returned home. Half-running, half-trotting I returned to the church I had left only a few hours ago, stumbling and scrambling up the hill. The picnic lawn before it was empty and, whimpering and sobbing, I entered the church itself. I remembered all too well my careless words spoken on the picnic-lawn about it wasn't as if Ken were irresponsible and starting a family with his keep.

Mariammah had hanged herself. I knew she would be dead, but I didn't know what she would have done. She dangled from the central rafter, the upturned stool used for cleaning the cross below her feet, and the slight breeze had slipped her sari from her shoulder so that it trailed on the floor.

'Oh, Mariammah, oh, Mariammah,' I said over and over. I couldn't seem to leave the dreadful sight, I kept staring at her and muttering her name, and weeping and wringing my hands and at last I came to my senses and set off to the office.

It was mail time when I arrived. The chief clerk was sorting it and everybody was present, the manager, Tuan Ian, David and Ken. I ran up the steps and then hung in the doorway, gasping for breath. They all discovered me simultaneously, but Ken was the first to react. He sprang towards me, gripped my shoulders and shook me.

'It's Mariammah!' he shouted. 'It's Mariammah! What's happened to Mariammah?'

He gave me a violent shake, as if to force me to speak,

and I said in a whisper, 'She's hanged herself. In the church.'

'Oh, my God,' Tuan Ian said in a shocked, hushed voice, and then he followed Ken to the Land-Rover, jumping into it as Ken started off.

I can't explain why I did what I did. Perhaps, feeling guilty, I wanted greater guilt than mine to assume the responsibility. That's probably it. I leaned towards the manager and said, 'You did it! You drove her to it!'

Looking back now, I can see that of course I touched him on a raw spot. He himself was feeling as guilty, if not guiltier than I. His natural reaction was the familiar temper tantrum.

'Get out of here!' he yelled, waving his fists at me, 'and don't ever set foot on my estate again! I'm telling Helena to get rid of you! I don't want to see your face! Get out, get out!'

He was advancing on me and I turned to go when David caught me by the arm and held me. I was as surprised as the manager.

'You may be able to force Helena to dismiss Zainah,' David said in a quiet, icy tone, 'because after all Ian has a wife and family dependent on him and therefore must obey your whims. But I don't have such responsibilities. If Zainah leaves Helena's, I shall employ her.'

And then I found my voice. Probably I was so carried away by what David had said, that I suddenly acquired a Dutch courage.

'Budwood,' I said loudly. 'Ian's young, he'll come up with another idea. Remember three things: Never grow old; the only good Japs are dead Japs; never be alone.'

He remembered. He hadn't been so drunk that he didn't remember. His temper subsided and a crafty look came into his face, pinching it.

'There were no witnesses,' he said, spitting the words at me and then, realizing by implication he corroborated what I'd said before a roomful of witnesses, he screamed at both David and me, 'Get out! Get out of my sight!'

and turned from us into his own office where he slammed shut the door.

David pulled me with him towards his Land-Rover and pushed me into it. As he got behind the wheel and headed for the church he said sharply, 'Get hold of yourself, Zainah. There's a lot to be done and you are needed.'

The next hours were gruesome. The police came and questioned us all but of course only I knew the truth, and Mariammah's note was with me, inside my bra. The others could shed no light on the suicide, and I had nothing to say, nor did they trouble questioning me except perfunctorily. A coffin was sent up and we buried Mariammah by the church, labour recruited from the lines digging the grave. The old gardener from Ken's bungalow came, and I can still see him picking up the rope Mariammah had used and slowly and neatly folding it up and putting it in his pocket.

I was so tired at the end of that horrible day that I fell asleep in the Land-Rover when David started to drive me home. Instead he left me at Mem Helena's, and I awoke in the nursery the next morning, late, with the baby asleep in the crib and the little boy playing with the dog and sailing his plastic duck outside.

When I went into the dining-room I found breakfast already over, Mem Helena marketing in the village and Tuan Ian stretched out on the sofa reading the morning paper. I didn't feel like food so I made myself a cup of coffee and brought it into the lounge with a slice of cheese. I felt listless, spent.

'Do you want to talk about Mariammah?' Tuan Ian asked. I shook my head. 'I want to forget it,' I said.

'Well, then, let's talk of something else,' he suggested. 'What did you mean by those cryptic words about budwood and dead Japanese and the rest of it? David told me.'

'That's what he said the tennis court night, that's the part I didn't tell you,' I answered, and suddenly into my tired brain slipped a thought. First I detailed the whole

conversation, or manager's monologue rather, to him, and then I decided on a further step. If I could make Tuan Ian sufficiently convinced of the manager's malignancy, he might ask for a transfer immediately to another estate, and with me to tell what I'd heard and overheard if Tuan Ian were asked to state reasons in the event of the manager's opposition, the whole miserable story would come to light, the last thing the manager would want. So if Tuan Ian asked to leave, I reasoned the manager would endorse his action. That would *make* David turn to me. He had anyway said he would employ me if Mem Helena didn't. Wasn't the next step easy to foresee?

'There's something more that I think you should know,' I said, and brought my coffee cup to the sofa where there was a pouf and I sat down on that. Our heads were at a level.

'Something more?'

'About the manager's attitude towards you.'

'Is there really something I don't know?' he sounded both weary and amused.

'I think so,' I said, and told him about the manager writing abusive confidential letters about him, and how everyone knew because when the chief clerk got drunk he would tell whoever was buying his whisky what the letters contained and how we knew when such letters were written because the postmaster advised the interested parties, in return for a consideration. He looked at the ceiling while I spoke, and I felt he believed me. The truth, simply told, so rarely sounds convincing. When I had finished, he turned his head towards me and asked gently, 'Why are you telling me this *now*? If you were going to tell me, why didn't you when first you learned of it? Why *now*?'

I couldn't answer that so I looked down into my coffee cup.

'By any chance, Zainah,' he asked slowly, 'do you expect me to confront the manager with this information, or do you expect me to ask for a transfer elsewhere?'

'One or the other, I should imagine,' I mumbled, still looking into my coffee.

'If I took action, we both know I'd leave this estate, and go elsewhere. There must be a reason why you want us to leave and I can think of only one reason,' he said.

I put the cup and saucer carefully down on the floor and raised my head to look at him.

'I've been busy, Zainah, but I've not been blind,' he said. 'You've fallen in love with David, haven't you?' He asked it so kindly and without criticism that I felt myself nodding assent. 'Yes,' he said musingly, 'I can see that it would be easy to fall in love with David. Helena herself has a soft spot for him, at one time I feared too soft.' He seemed to have forgotten me, to be thinking aloud. 'But he can't offer her the life she wants. He's a wanderer and she wants to be settled. She had enough unsettlement in Java with her home confiscated and the years in the camp and arbitrarily being shipped to a country she knew nothing of.' He remembered me and smiled. 'If he were gone, David wouldn't have much company, would he?' He asked. 'Only you. And young planters have been known to marry the girls who console them for the isolated life they're obliged to lead. It *could* happen. I don't think David's that sort of man, and he's too much in love himself – elsewhere – to marry a woman he doesn't love. But I see your point, Zainah, it was a chance worth trying for.'

I felt myself blushing, abashed at being so easily found out.

'I'm sorry to see through you,' Tuan Ian said gravely, 'you should have known I would. Obviously you haven't given *me* much thought. You've been so concentrated first on Helena and then on David. I've been something that's always around, like the bungalow.'

That was too true to deny and I turned my eyes away.

'As for that other thing,' he swung his feet to the floor and sat up on the sofa, 'I've known about it for some time. Sanamavarathan is the most careless chief clerk I

know, aside from being a drunkard. He doesn't always seal his letters properly and it didn't take me too long to figure out the manager's many confidential letters which I wasn't permitted to see must be about me. It's something I plan to take up with the board itself when I go to London, for I've made refutations of all the charges against me. I'm simply biding my time. No, Zainah, you can't get rid of us so easily, you're stuck with us. You remind me of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, you've put something into motion that you can't stop.'

'Oh,' I cried out impulsively, 'why didn't I fall in love with *you*?'

Tuan Ian laughed at that.

'Because I'm so inaccessible, you mean? You'd settle for an unhappy love affair provided it was properly hopeless?' He turned serious again and asked, 'Have you talked to anyone about this? Have you told anyone how you feel about David?'

'I've told David,' I said.

'I don't suppose that helps much,' he commented. 'Poor Zainah,' he went on, 'loving is such a complex and heart-breaking undertaking, and you have to go through it alone and in a world alien to the one you were born in and instinctively know how to deal with. Poor Zainah.'

EIGHT

I WANT to be accurate about this next. Sometimes, when one carefully explains a thing, it isn't as bad as it appears to be. I am not looking for an excuse – once a thing has been done it's senseless to start excusing it – but I wish to be understood.

In the first place, I was unprepared and off-guard. I was entirely certain that if no shred of gossip had reached the kampong by now about those months of mine in town, no gossip could possibly ever reach the kampong. The story was too old, and people's memories never very strong.

I came home after my talk with Tuan Ian, thinking about David and wondering if after my visit to his bedroom he would ask me out again with him, and if he didn't and I proposed a trip to the beach, if he would agree. I didn't see my father standing at the end of the veranda, and I mounted the tiled steps slowly with my head bent in thought. His voice stopped me at the top.

'My daughter,' he called, formally.

I went to him without haste, puzzled. He looked severe and troubled, and I wondered what had gone wrong on the kampong, or if the price of rubber had dropped badly and I was unaware of it, or if bugs had got into the coffee bushes.

'The Imam has been speaking to me,' my father said, and stopped.

I was more puzzled than ever. The Imam and he were always speaking together. Was it something political, I wondered, and if so how could it concern me?

'Some of our people have been in town,' my father went on, 'and they heard gossip. Gossip about you, Zainah.' My father held up a remonstrating hand as I cried out in unfeigned dismay. 'I know what towns are and how every little thing gets exaggerated. The point is, they reported

what they heard to the Imam and he has told it to me.'

Looking back soberly, I can only marvel now that the truth about me took so long to reach the kampong. Our people go frequently to town: to the dentist, for shopping, for a good time, and we like to gossip. It's a nice way to spend the time. I suppose somewhere a casual reference, not even malicious, was made about me, some idle questions asked and then the whole story came out. I had hardly been discreet in town, and it was sheer good luck my doings hadn't reached the kampong until that day.

'He has been told that while you were in town you went with men, that you became a bad woman and went with many men. Is there any truth in that?'

I had never considered myself a bad woman, a passionate woman, yes, a somewhat promiscuous woman, yes, but not a bad woman. I was able to deny the charge truthfully.

'I have never been a bad woman!' I refuted hotly. 'The Imam should know me better than that!'

'Yes,' my father said, nodding, but still not relieved, although it was the answer he expected to hear. He remained stern and unrelaxed.

'The Imam has been told,' he went on, 'that you are not a virgin.' When I said nothing, he asked the question I dreaded. 'Zainah, are you a virgin?'

I knew that the kampong midwife could examine me if the Imam insisted upon proof, and knowing the Imam, I also knew he *would* insist upon proof, if only to clear himself of tale-bearing. There was no possibility of a lie.

'No,' I said, 'I am not a virgin,' and I looked down at my feet because I didn't want to see my father's hurt face.

We stood opposite each other some minutes, neither of us speaking, and then my father said heavily, 'The man. Who is the man?'

I thought how naïve it was, and how typical, that my father assumed there could be but one man. Then, two things happened: I panicked and at the same time I schemed.

I would have to produce a name and, according to the customs of the kampong, whoever I named would be approached by my father and the Imam, for the penalty of seducing a virgin, and refusing to marry her was very grave. Then I remembered Mariammah and the note still between my breasts telling me she was pregnant.

'Who is the man, Zainah?' His voice was level and demanding.

'David,' I said, thinking and not thinking, and as soon as I said it I knew I had to sound more convincing. 'It's David!' I repeated and lifted my eyes to my father. 'I am four months pregnant by David!'

My father looked as if I had hit him. His eyes glazed, he passed his hand over his forehead; his expression was stunned; incredulous, and he groped for the back of the nearest chair to steady himself. Grave as the pressure and penalty was for deflowering a virgin and not marrying her, to make a virgin pregnant and then not marry her necessitated an even severer punishment. The kampong, in such matters, was adamant, and its morality deeply treasured.

'A white man,' my father whispered, and I realized of course he had assumed I would be true to my people and select a Muslim as my lover. 'David.' He breathed the name as if to familiarize himself with it, although he knew David well. 'Mem Helena's man,' he went on, in a tone of wonderment. I hadn't suspected he knew that, too. He looked at me in sorrow and then walked past me to the stairway and said, 'I must consult the Imam. You will remain in the house.'

Had a Muslim been the responsible man, community pressure would undoubtedly have forced him to marry me. It was a pressure impossible to resist. But when a white man played fast and loose with one of our girls, that was a much more serious offence, and in a kampong as touchy as ours about our good standing, there was only the same way out for him, with the difference that the community would never really forgive him as they would a Muslim.

I couldn't sit still, so I took the watering-can and watered the plants and weeded those that needed it and trimmed the others. My attention to the plants had been sporadic, and my sisters were somehow not as good with them as I was. Then I put Mariammah's saris and blouses among my own things and slipped on the thin gold bracelet and chain Ken had given her. I felt perhaps they would bring me luck. An hour later I saw my father and the Imam walk by the house, and I loitered on the veranda where my father could see me.

He called up to me, 'We are calling on David.'

The Imam did not look at me. I know my father was too distressed and too reticent to ask me any details. My word would have to suffice. I watched them walk slowly away, along the road that led to the village and the rubber estate, two elderly men on a disagreeable mission.

I was nervous, prickly with misery, regretting what I had done and still, underneath it all, hopeful. I think hope is like a weed, one never gets rid of it. There was a chance David might acquiesce. He knew our customs, he would understand the reprisal for refusal. He would certainly be gallant enough never to tell that I myself had told him I had been no virgin even when first he met me; and above all, he liked me. He did more than like me, although less than love me.

The long wait for my father's return sent me into a frenzy of suppressed excitement. I huddled by the radio and pretended to be absorbed in the broadcast, so that my sisters would leave me alone. When I saw my father and the Imam return, still walking slowly, I remained where I was on the veranda. They parted at the foot of the stairway, and as my father came on the veranda I switched the broadcast down, but not off, so that it provided a covering noise for anything my father might say to me and my sisters could not overhear.

He sat down in one of the rattan chairs by the table, passed his hand over his eyes and rubbed them. I came up to him and waited. He looked tired, perplexed and very old.

'David denies everything,' he said, looking at me.

I nodded. 'You couldn't expect him to admit it, could you?' I asked. 'But the midwife can prove that I am not a virgin.' I reasoned that if I were so ready to submit to an examination my word would be accepted, not only on this point (which was true), but on the point of pregnancy, which was not true.

My father, his face troubled and his manner grave, said slowly, 'Love is a terribly thing. I remember your mother. I had to have her. I would have done anything,' he paused and sighed and repeated, '*anything* to get her: lied, cheated, stolen, even murdered. I was out of my head, she was a fire in my blood and in my brain. Twenty-four hours a day I had her *here*,' and he smote his forehead between the eyes. 'If I have passed on to you my capacity for passion, for obsession, I am deeply sorry. The fault is mine, not yours. It is an inheritance I never wanted you to have.'

I sat down opposite him, the table between us, my clasped hands stretched before me and towards him. It was the nearest to supplicating that I could come.

'When I brought your mother here, from Malacca, I built the Malacca tiled steps for her so that she wouldn't feel homesick. She liked pink, so I bought every pink sarong I could find. I grew pink flowers for her. When she died, I would have wanted to die, too, except I had you, and as you grew up you became more like her, in looks and, I thought, in temperament. She was a sweet and gentle woman.' He looked out across the kampong and then said sadly, 'You're like me. You are passionate and violent, burning inside, wild, primitive, and I didn't know before, I didn't know.' He grasped his head with his hands and said in a sort of low wail, 'And I'm to blame. I insisted on bringing you into the world, I wanted your mother all over again so that I could see her as a child, a little girl, and that would be through you. And I've given you a terrible trait.'

He sat there for some time and I had nothing to say. My father had never spoken to me like this. Then he

roused himself and said in a practical tone, 'The kampong believes it is David, *they* don't doubt you.'

It was as near as he came to telling me outright he didn't believe me. 'They'll press for a marriage or else a retribution. I shall have to give it to them, the one or the other. Not only your reputation and my honour are at stake, but the reputation and honour of the kampong. They're jealous of both.' He stood up abruptly. 'Zainah, I am going to pray.'

I stood up, too, and then, as if giving me a last chance, he asked, 'Who was the man, Zainah? Who was the man?'

'David,' I brought out, but it was more a strangled cry than a name.

'You are in love with him,' my father said. 'You will do *anything*.'

'You won my mother,' I reminded him.

'Only for those few years. I couldn't win against death.'

In the next week my father and the Imam and my father alone called on David several times. I suspect my father suggested, however obliquely, to David that he flee the area, that he go abroad and escape the wrath of the kampong. He did what he could to save him and still not betray his own position.

Mem Helena tried to see me, but I sent my sisters to tell her I was indisposed, which she never believed for an instant. I could not, I would not talk to her about David. The week was a long period of time, longer it seemed to me than my whole life.

Then, one evening, my father sought me out in the kitchen-shed where I was doing household chores.

'Tuan Ian is here,' he said. 'He has asked to see you.'

I had been wiping a bowl, and now it slipped through my fingers, splintering on the floor. It hadn't occurred to me that Tuan Ian would call on me, and I could not refuse to see him, so I followed my father to the house, to the corner of the veranda with the table and chairs where I had spoken with my father. Tuan Ian stood there, waiting.

Then my father did a very curious thing, he bowed slightly to Tuan Ian and withdrew, and I realized Tuan Ian had asked to see me alone. I sat down and he sat down next to me, twisting his chair so that he faced me. Like a schoolgirl, I placed my clasped hands at the edge of the table.

‘You have to stop this,’ he said in a low voice.

I tightened my lips and stared down at my hands, fixing my gaze on Mariammah’s gold bracelet on my wrist.

‘My God, Zainah,’ he said urgently, ‘I’m not blaming *you*. I blame *us*, myself, Helena, David and the manager’s Mem for teaching you English in the first place. We meant well, but we couldn’t foresee anything like this.’

‘My father blames himself,’ I said at once.

He misunderstood.

‘Your father is simply carrying out community wishes. He has no choice. Now, Zainah,’ he leaned forward in his chair, ‘I’ve been beating my brains about you, and there is one thing I don’t understand, a missing link in the story. If you’d tell it to me, then I’d understand why you’ve acted as you have and perhaps I could help you.’ He gave me a chance to speak, but I waited for him to go on. ‘What *provoked* you to name David as your seducer? Why was it necessary to name *anyone*? And why won’t you give the name of the man who really did it and save David?’ He emphasised his question with light slaps of his palms on the table.

I turned my head involuntarily, because that was the crux of the matter. If my father hadn’t asked me if I were a virgin, I wouldn’t have incriminated David, and my father wouldn’t have asked me if the Imam hadn’t been told rumours.

I was tempted to tell him the true story, and then I thought, how could Tuan Ian help me? The kampong wanted its revenge on *somebody*, and the only result of Tuan Ian’s knowledge would be that he could no longer respect me. He would most likely tell David and my case would be worse than ever. I looked down at my wrists.

'I see I've asked the right question,' he said, 'but you won't answer.'

'It was David,' I insisted stubbornly. 'Do you think I'm the only woman he's made pregnant? There's a Eurasian girl carrying his baby this minute, and he has also had a child by ... someone else.'

There was a long silence and I did not dare raise my head. Finally Tuan Ian said, 'Helena is my wife. She can make mistakes, but she can do no wrong. Do you understand that?'

I understood that very well.

'It's David,' I repeated. Then I looked up. Tuan Ian was pale under the light from the hanging kerosene lamp. He was framed in blackness, only his head and shoulders emerging into the light, and strange shadows played around his face as the lamp swung slightly. 'David could go away,' I said distinctly. 'He could put his passport in his pocket and get into his car and be in Kuala Lumpur in time to catch the next flight to Singapore. He could get on a boat and sail to Hawaii, to South America, to any place in the world and the kampong could never reach him.'

When I paused Tuan Ian said at once, 'Go on, Zainah. I've thought of that. I don't understand why he stays here. But *you* know, *you* tell me.'

'He's staying because Mem Helena told him she did not want him in her life,' I said. 'I heard her say it. There is no privacy in the tropics, Tuan Ian. Our walls are made of light wood, our windows and doors stand open, there is no noise of traffic to cover up speech. I heard her say it as clearly as I can hear the call of a minah on your lawn when I stand in the lounge.'

'Zainah, you're insinuating,' he began, but I interrupted.

'I'm not insinuating. I'm telling you. David said since she did not want him in her life there was but one way to go from her, the way that's in the marriage vow.'

'You are making Helena into a murderess,' Tuan Ian said in a dangerously quiet voice. 'I won't have that.'

'Tuan Ian,' I answered, 'in the matter of David and myself I won't pretend to you I have told the truth. In reporting to you what Mem Helena told David, I speak the truth.'

He didn't answer me, but got up slowly, knocking over the light chair. He looked frightful. I was certain that out in the darkness we were being watched, by my father, by the Imam, by some of the kampong elders. I rose, too. I stood so close to him that when I bent my head and pressed it against his shoulder I didn't even have to step forward.

'I love David with all my heart and soul and head and body,' I said. 'I've loved Mem Helena as a friend, a sister, for years. I love my father for being what he is, an upright man in the kampong and a loving father to me. And I love you, too, for being everything that's good and decent in David's world.'

He didn't hear me, perhaps I whispered it too low. He stepped away from me and with a distraught gesture, said, 'I must stop this. I must find a way to stop this,' and, without looking at me, he stumbled down the stairs. To spectators, it must appear as if I had won some sort of victory and sent him away, a defeated man.

Tuan Ian had been my father's last hope. He had no further excuse to delay, and when he mounted the steps as Tuan Ian went blindly past him he said to me without looking at me, 'The men from Kelantan are working tonight.'

He left me alone on the veranda. I sat on at the table, listening to the night noises of the kampong settling down, watching the lamps put out, aware that silence was taking over. I felt abandoned. My father would not stay with me at this time. David did not love me. I had refused to see Mem Helena. Mariammah was dead. There was nobody, not even a pet animal to turn to for comfort. I thought of

the manager's advice, 'Never be alone', and was grimly aware I was more alone than he was. He had a rapacious keep and a bumbling Labrador puppy, not much, but something. I was truly alone. I sat on, frightened at my isolation, turning and turning Mariammah's bracelet on my arm, and then all my confusion and fear crystallized into one knowledge: I must save David. A world without David was no world at all. I could not live in this vacuum of aloneness. I must save David and try for him again, some other way. I would think of something.

I slipped off the veranda and out on to the deserted road. I began to run, pelting through the empty village with its shuttered shops and into the rubber estate. Not until I was in sight of David's bungalow did I practise caution, and then I moved silently along the edge of the rubber trees towards his bedroom. There was a half moon, giving an uncertain light, and in the rubber it was dark. I had covered half the distance to David's bedroom when I saw two figures slip over the sill and run off into the rubber and towards me. The moon caught their turbans, topping each man momentarily with a glistening light.

I sank on my knees in the rubber, my arms around the trunk of a tree, seeking support of some kind. The turbaned men were nearing me, taking the very path I had intended to take. I saw them glide soundlessly under the shadow of the frangi-pani, and then out into the pale light by a bed of cannas where one of them paused and wiped what he was carrying on a canna leaf. They made no sound, and as they came up to me I held my breath. They passed within a few feet of me and melted into the rubber. It was certainly the elderly leader and the young boy.

David's bungalow looked ghostly and dead and I stared at it, knowing it was now no longer his house but his tomb. It was over. I had come too late. I wanted to pray, but I didn't know to whom. I had no gods I really believed in, so I prayed to David, pouring out my love and repentance in a soft and incoherent babble, trying not to

imagine him as he lay on his blood-soaked bed with his skull cleaved in two.

Much later I got up and took a circuitous route to Mem Helena's bungalow, avoiding the early morning tappers with their miners' lights on their heads and who moved like fire-flies among the dark trees. The bungalow slept, only the porte-cochère light was on, and the light in the five-foot way. I went to the French doors on the terrace on the opposite side from the bedrooms and tried the handle. It was unlocked. There was no need, nor possibility, of securely locking a bungalow. Anybody who wished to could always enter somewhere. The shutters were too warped to close and the locks, for the most part, broken. In the dark of the lounge I went straight to Mem Helena's weapon collection and took the Kelantan hatchet from the wall and then I walked out, not bothering to close the glass-paned door behind me.

I waited until dawn to enter the police station. I claimed I had committed the crime in David's bungalow, and I laid the weapon on the big desk in the main room. They do not for one instant believe me, but there is no disproof.

Mem Helena says the law doesn't want a multiple victim. Of all of those guilty of David's death, including David himself, I am the most dispensable. I have no husband, no children, no lover, no responsibility to either the kampong community or the rubber estate. The most innocent are the Kelantan men who undertook the murder and disappeared. The rest of us divide the guilt among us.

GLOSSARY

amah – Chinese female servant.

attap – dried palm fronds used for roofing.

basha – shelter with slanted roof.

bandit – Communist terrorist.

bazaar Malay – that form of the Malay language commonly spoken as opposed to *raja* Malay, spoken by the nobility, and *kampong Malay*, spoken by Malay villagers.

baju – jacket worn by Malay women.

Capitan China – nineteenth-century Chinese who came to Malaya, contracted Chinese labour and developed the commercial potential of the country, mostly through tin-mining at that time. The Federation's capital, Kuala Lumpur, was created by such self-made successful men.

cheongsam – a sheath dress, high-collared and slit over both thighs worn by Chinese women of the higher class.

chapati – Indian bread.

chongkul – hoe.

D.O. – District Officer.

dato – sir.

durians – a succulent fruit with urine odour.

emergency – the state of war declared by the Malayan Government to fight the Communist guerrillas in the jungle since 1848, and ended July 1860.

five-foot way – covered alley, five feet wide, between bungalow and kitchen shed, or street sidewalk.

foo-yong-hai – a Chinese dish of shredded crab, scrambled eggs, bamboo shoots, spices and the individual cook's personal additions.

ganti – substitute.

Haji – a pilgrim who has been to Mecca.

Imam – the spiritual leader of the Muslim community.
joget – Malay national dance, a sort of slow samba where the partners never touch each other.
kampung – small Malay agricultural village.
kanghani – supervisor of field labour.
kebaya – waist-pinching female jacket, often transparent.
keep – mistress.
kerbau – semi-domesticated water-buffalo.
kris – a Malay and Indonesian knife with wavy blade.
kuki – cook.
lallang – a noxious grass.
mahmee – Chinese noodle dish usually with lumps of fried pork or chicken.
makan – food.
makan ketchil – hors d'oeuvres, canapés.
mangosteens – a sweet white tasty fruit with hard brown outer covering.
mem – title given to European women.
merdeka – freedom (from the Sanskrit).
minah – mimic bird.
monsoon – heavy rains from the China Sea lashing Malaya's east coast.
muster – pre-dawn call-up of labour.
nasi goreng – fried rice.
orang-puteh – white man (orang-outang is a Malay word).
padang – grassy field for sports, outdoor meetings.
pahit table – small chairside table for drinks.
parang – Malay knife, good for slashing, all lengths and weights and prices.
penghulu – kampong headman.
pyedogs – local smooth-haired dogs, usually terrier-sized and some variation of brown.
rambutans – juicy white fruit wrapped in prickly red exterior.
ronggeng – like joget.
samfu – jacket and trousers worn by Chinese (fu means trousers).

sarong – cotton garment worn around the hips by men and women alike.

satay – barbecued strips of beef or chicken wrapped on slivers.

Shanghai jar – a large stone tub, hip-high, for washing or bathing.

Sumatra – gale strength winds from Indonesia.

syce – chauffeur.

Tamil – a southern Indian.

tanah hijau – green earth.

tengku – prince.

tiangs – supporting columns in constructions, jungle hardwood.

tiffin – luncheon.

tote – slang for ‘estate’ or ‘job’.

towkay – a Chinese boss who has made good.

van der Joachims – purple orchids, a common variety.

wayang – a show.

whisky-ayer – whisky with water.

NANKING ROAD

Vicki Baum

Gathered together in Shanghai's biggest hotel, on the eve of the Japanese invasion, is a cosmopolitan assortment of people. There is a Chinese millionaire who began life as a rickshaw coolie; a famous German gynaecologist on the run from the Nazis; a nursing sister from a small town in the U.S.A.; a Russian woman married to a wealthy Englishman; an American photographer living on the edge of penury.

Thrown together by accident, their personal problems are drawn into a knot of crisis until a climax is reached which is both tragic and unexpected.

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